



Today's 'Tongues' & Linguistics

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Recently I received a copy of an article from the *Assembly of God 'Australian Evangel'* titled '*A Pastor and a Linguist Discuss Speaking In Other Tongues*'. The article is a discussion between a pastor Ron Wilson and a Dr. Tony Evenhuis attempting to prove that today's Pentecostal/Charismatic speaking in unknown tongues is an experience from God and received by faith. Tony claims to be a 'linguist' and fluent in 5-6 languages. (He is actually a *lecturer in French* at the university of Tasmania, Australia).

Tony tells of a dream he once had when he was 'seeking' the gift of tongues. In the dream he saw a newspaper '*with alternating lines*', one a language he knew and another he did not understand. He began to recite the unknown language by syllables and then he was able to '*put the paper aside and keep going by myself*'. From that dream he then takes a quantum leap to today's 'tongue speaking' and makes an astounding statement: '*There remains something mysterious about 'tongues'. If we try too much to look for evidence to strengthen our case, it is as if the Lord says: No, I'm not going to do it that way, you have to accept this by faith*'. And '*the genuineness of this experience is not determined by identifying the language spoken. In fact that would be difficult with the thousands of languages in the world. The validity of any experience is tested by God's word...all his gifts are received by faith...*' Tony then goes on to say how he got this unknown tongues 'experience' - he was advised to '*go to a quiet place alone, relax, and just speak to the Lord any words that came into my head*'.

Tony is then asked by Pastor Ron if today's 'tongues' in churches are 'real languages'. Tony rightly answers: '*a linguist can tell the difference between real language and gibberish*'; but then he says: '*not every utterance in 'tongues' that I have heard has had the characteristics of a true language, but others certainly have...*' He then cites his wife as one day hearing a person speaking in tongues in 'Italian' who knew no Italian.

Pastor Ron concludes: '*the most important use of tongues is for private prayer in which the speaker is built up by faith*'. 1Corinthians 14:4 is cited as a proof-text.

Experience or Scripture?:

It will be noticed that this 'gift' of speaking in unknown tongues was received *by experience*. The whole article is based on a dream and then

an experience in ‘*a quiet place*’. *No scripture is applied to explain this event*. The article says that the gift is received ‘by faith’ - but what faith? - is it a blind experiential faith, or a faith in what the Bible actually says about ‘tongues’?

Pastor Ron says ‘*the genuineness of this experience is not determined by identifying the language spoken. In fact that would be difficult with the thousands of languages in the world. The validity of any experience is tested by God’s word...all his gifts are received by faith...*’. Yet nowhere in the article is scripture given to validate these views. Nowhere in God’s word does it teach that we accept this ‘gift’ ‘by faith’ or that we ‘seek’ it? And contrary to what Ron says, the ‘genuineness of this experience’ can actually be tested by ‘*identifying the language spoken*’! Linguistic experts can in time identify a language family and even a dialect.

But lets ‘test’ this ‘gift’ *using God’s Word*: The Greek root word for ‘tongues’ is ‘*glossa*’ and in scripture always refers to *known* human languages or to the physical organ of the tongue. There are only three cases of people speaking in tongues in the New Testament: they are found in Acts Chs. 2,10,19. The word translated ‘*language*’ and ‘*tongue*’ in Acts 2:6,8 is the Greek ‘*dialektos*’ meaning *known* ethnic languages or dialects. The ‘*tongues*’ in Acts 10 were also *known* human languages as is proved by the phrase in vs.45 ‘*on the Gentiles also*’ and vs.47 ‘*as well as we*’. Here the Gentiles had exhibited the *same known human languages as the Jews had in Acts 2*. The fact that they ‘*magnified God*’ (vs.46) also proved there was *understanding*. Lastly, in Acts 19 there is no evidence that the experience there was any different to Acts 2 or 10.

Some say today’s tongues are ‘angelic languages’ but if ‘*the validity of any experience is tested by God’s word*’ as Pastor Ron says, then lets test this!: *In every instance in the Bible, angels always spoke in known human earthly languages that were understood*, (e.g. to Abraham, Lot, Jacob, Peter...)

To escape the fact that Biblical ‘tongues’ are always *known* languages some will go to 1Corinthians 14: Firstly, the ‘*spirit*’ here is always in *lower case* (small ‘s’) and speaking of the human spirit, not the Holy Spirit. This is proved by verse 14: ‘*if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful*’. The chapter is not about any angelic or ‘Holy Spirit language’ but rather about a *selfish problem* that Paul was *correcting* - to do with the Corinthians own human spirits.

1Corinthians 14 is a *rebuke* and teaching *against* the practice of uttering in an ‘unknown tongue’! The word ‘**understanding**’ and ‘**edification**’ are key words the apostle Paul uses *repeatedly* to have the Corinthians speak in languages that are ‘understood’. Paul uses these words to argue *for* known *understandable* languages (‘*glossais*’ - ‘tongues’ - plural) as in prophesy; as *contrasted to* an ‘unknown tongue’ (‘*glosse*’ - singular). If the reader underlines the plural ‘tongues’ and brackets the singular [‘unknown tongue’] they will discern that *Paul never argues for or favours the ‘unknown tongue’*! Rather, he strongly argues for ‘understanding’ and thus ‘edification’ *for the church; in contrast to* edification of self with any ‘unknown tongue’.

Many people might also forget that the Corinthian church was *multi-linguistic*. Paul himself spoke in many different languages: Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew (Acts 22:2; 26:14), Latin (Acts 22:25-28); and additionally, there were many other dialects in Corinth.

Lastly, the word ‘**interpret**’ (‘*diermeneuo*’) literally means ‘to interpret, translate, to explain clearly and exactly’. When it is used in scripture it means to interpret *from one known language into another known language* (Jn.9:7; Acts 9:36; Heb.7:2). It is *never* used in the sense of translating from an unknown language into one that was known!

The key summary of 1Corinthians 14 is found in verses 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***’. Again, there are *two distinctions* in tongues here (‘tongues’ and ‘unknown tongue’). Otherwise we have a contradiction! Paul speaks *for* one and *against* the other. The ‘tongues’ (plural) are *known* languages; the ‘unknown tongue (singular) being spoken in the Corinthian church is that which Paul is urging the Corinthians to leave behind for the sake of ‘**understanding**’ and ‘**edification**’. In these verses 18,19 - two extremes are put for the sake of emphasis.

So why ever would Paul condone the following ‘*advice*’: ‘*go to a quiet place alone, relax, and just speak to the Lord any words that came into my head*’. Again, the writer applies no scripture to validate this experience. Why condone something in private that Paul speaks against in the church? Why teach something that does not give ‘**understanding**’ or ‘**edification**’

to the body of Christ? How does one know it is from the Lord if it cannot be 'identified' as a known language? And why is this experience of unknown tongues not found in Acts 2 !?

Linguistics:

Dr. Tony, arguably, is no linguistic expert. Certainly his testimony contradicts that of many linguists, and defies linguistic principles. Many qualified linguists of the 20th century have examined the 'unknown tongue' or ecstatic utterances as exhibited in many churches today and they simply contradict what Dr. Tony says. Here is just one example: *'We do know something about representative languages of every known language family in the world...If a glossolalic, (i.e. one who professes to speak in unknown tongues in the Holy Spirit's power), were speaking any of the thousand languages of Africa, there is about a 90 percent probability that I would know it in a minute. Now, I have also had the opportunity of making a sympathetic study of an alleged instance of speaking in tongues. And I must report without reservation that my sample does not sound like a language structurally...The consonants and vowels do not all sound like English (the glossolalic's native language), but the intonation patterns are so completely American English that the total effect is a bit ludicrous. My sample includes an 'interpretation'. At the most generous estimate, the glossolalic utterance includes ten or eleven 'sentences' ...But the 'interpretation' involved no less than fourteen distinct and independent ideas. There simply can be no match between the 'tongue' and the 'interpretation'... from the viewpoint of a Christian linguist the modern phenomenon of glossalia would appear to be a linguistic fraud and monstrosity, given even the most generous interpretation of 1Corinthians 12-14'.**

If one researches today's unknown tongue phenomena linguistically, these are the obvious conclusions:

1. The frequency of 'repetition' in today's 'tongues' speaking and the excessive use of one or two vowels.
2. The similarity of the tongues spoken to the speaker's own linguistic background. (The accent does not change as easily as Dr. Tony would have us believe).
3. The absence of language structure.

4. The great length of the ‘interpretation’ as compared with the tongue utterance!
5. The inconsistent ‘interpretation’ of the *same* clauses or phrases.

There are numerous reports of those who have ‘tested’ the ‘tongues’ in churches today by entering a prayer group or church service and speaking in a known second language. In every instance the language has been interpreted giving an entirely different meaning to the words spoken. This proves the interpretation was false and not ‘from the Holy Spirit’; and that the congregation had no discernment or true understanding of what was said, (the speaker could have blasphemed the Lord and who would have known?).

Another method of discerning the validity of the tongue and the interpretation is as follows: tape record a ‘tongues message’ and then have two separate ‘interpreters’ with the ‘gift of interpretation’ interpret the same message, with each interpreter being isolated in separate rooms. Then compare the two interpretations. They should be identical. An extension of this test would be to have the message in a known foreign language and then have the two interpreters, again separately, interpret the message.

Are churches today prepared to be tested in their unknown tongues? This ministry has on numerous occasions challenged Pentecostal/Charismatic leaders to be so tested and all challenges have met with either a wall of silence or we have been accused of using ‘carnal’ methods!

The evidence by Dr. Tony is not only linguistically false but lacks objectiveness. If he says that *‘not every utterance in ‘tongues’ that I have heard has had the characteristics of a true language’* then what is it, where does it come from and why is it allowed? *Acts 2 lists all the ‘tongues’ as known human languages.* And Paul rebukes the Corinthians for using an ‘unknown tongue’ which gives no ‘understanding’.

‘Tongues’ is for ‘Private Prayer’?:

Pastor Ron finally says: *‘the most important use of tongues is for private prayer in which the speaker is built up by faith’*. 1Corinthians 14:4 is cited. But what does verse 4 really say? Let’s read it *in context with verse 3: ‘But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort. He that speaketh in an unknown tongue edifieth himself; **BUT** he that prophesieth edifieth the church’*. The word

‘but’ shows the *contrast* here between the unknown ‘tongue’ and prophecy. *This is selfishness contrasted with edification!* Paul does not commend this unknown ‘tongue’ but contrasts it to show something better. This is consistent with the *same contrast throughout the whole chapter!* And this unknown tongue here is not a ‘private prayer’. There is no text in the New Testament that speaks of a ‘prayer language’. The whole of chapter 14 is in fact about *public* behaviour *in the church!* (vs.19,22,23). Unknown tongues as ‘prayer language’ was unheard of until the mid 20th Century when certain Charismatic leaders introduced it into the denominations.**

Why would Paul teach the use of private unknown tongues when he speaks against them for the church? No gift is for self or for self edification! (Rom.14:19; 15:1-3; 1Thess 5:11). The gifts for the church are to ‘edify one another’ - the body of Christ (Eph.4:11,12). No gift is for self!

The history of the ‘tongues movement’ is unique to the 20th Century and how it entered the church should shock those who may be unaware of its history.** It came exactly as Pastor Ron and Dr. Tony say - by experience alone. Even its instigator, Charles Parham, later *rejected it* as did the church at large at the time. One commentator labelled it *‘the last great vomit of Satan’*. The use of the ‘unknown’ tongue has been a catalyst for division, ecumenism and the setting aside of scripture within the church, as well as a foreign body injected into the doctrine of Sanctification.

* ‘Christianity Today’, 8/11/63, P.127,128 Dr.William Welmers, Professor of African languages, University of California, Los Angeles.

** See the book *‘Tongues & The Baptism With the Spirit’* available from this ministry.

About the Author and the Ministry

Terry Arnold holds a Doctorate in Theology (Dth), a Masters degree (MABS) and several diplomas. He was founder and president of *South Pacific Bible Institute*, a Bible college training and equipping people for ministry. In addition he was the founder of Hervey Bay Bible Church in Queensland, Australia. He has for 25 years served as an elder and then pastor.

Terry is the author of several books and is involved in a full time ministry of *teaching, informing* and *equipping* the church. He is also editor of a growing worldwide publication '*Diakrisis (Australia)*'.

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TA Ministries is a non-denominational and non-profit faith ministry founded in 1989 when the book '*To Catholics Whom I Love*' was written by Terry Arnold. This book went through several re-prints and served as a fruitful outreach to Roman Catholics.

In 1996 the ministry became a full-time operation with the introduction of a free newsletter, later named '*Diakrisis (Australia)*'.

Diakrisis is published bi-monthly to *teach, inform* and *equip* the church of Biblical truths and to warn of false teaching. It has also been a valuable reference aid to hundreds of pastors/elders.