Text: I Corinthians 14:1-40
Title: "The Spirit Way … Tongues Untangled"

INTRODUCTION

Today I'm bringing to a close this series of messages I've entitled "The Spirit Way." The Holy Spirit in us makes possible the life that we've always wanted and the power that we've always needed. If that is true for us as individuals, then it is also true for us collectively as a church. There's a life that we want to experience when we are together as God's people, and that life is the Spirit of God among us. There's power that we need as we gather as God's people, and that power comes from the Holy Spirit working in and through us as believers as we use the spiritual gifts that God gives to us for ministry. And the mysterious thing is that when the Holy Spirit has to freedom to work in all of our lives like this, the result is that we are shaped into the Body of Christ … a body that ministers like Jesus ministered.

ILLUSTRATION – In about a week, as we start decorating our house for Christmas, I will pull a box out of the garage that contains a pile of fabric … brown, orange, red. And when I first set it out in the front yard, it looks just like a pile of brown, orange and red fabric. But inside that pile of fabric is a little motor, and when I plug in that motor air starts to fill that pile of brown, orange and red fabric. And before long it begins to take shape, and the next thing you know we have a huge display of Winnie the Poo, Tigger and Eyore … much to my granddaughter's delight, I might add. But without that flow of air inside that pile of fabric, you can't really tell what's there except a pile of fabric.

> And that's what God does by His Spirit working in His church. As the wind of the Spirit blows freely among us as God's people, we are filled, and we are shaped into the Body of Christ, so that when the world looks at us, they should see Jesus.

Now turn to I Corinthians 14 where we come to the climax of the teaching in I Corinthians on spiritual gifts … two in particular: the gift of prophecy and the gift of speaking in tongues. Let just get into this again today by reading vv.1-5.

Now I said last week that prophecy is the Spirit-empowered use of intelligible language to speak the truth revealed in Scripture and to apply it to the situation at hand.

Now v.2 mentions one "who speaks in a tongue." What we have there is a reference to the spiritual gift of speaking in different kinds of tongues that is mentioned in two lists in I Corinthians 12. And that's what we're going to talk about today.

> So if prophecy is a gift that uses understandable language to communicate truth, speaking in different tongues uses a language that is not understood by those present, or even by the speaker.

Now there are some extremes that we resist when it comes this gift of tongues:

- **Everyone should do it.** Tongues is something that everyone should do as an indication that they have received the Holy Spirit. There are certain churches that teach this, and it is not

biblical. I Corinthians 12 clearly teaches that "some" may have the gift of tongues, but not everyone.

- **No one should do it.** No one legitimately speaks in tongues today. This is a gift that has disappeared. It was a gift that was used exclusively in the first century to authenticate the apostles' ministry and it has ceased to exist. In just a moment I will explain why I don't think that is the case.

Having said that, you cannot read I Corinthians 14 without coming away with the clear signal that the gift of tongues is something very mysterious, and therefore must be handled with great caution. And this may be the reason that we see this gift manifested publicly, in its legitimate form, only in rare circumstances.

So let me see if we can untangle this issue of tongues.

ONE PRIORITY: <u>LOVE</u> (v.1)

1 Corinthians 14:1 (NIV) - Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.

The one overriding mandate for us when it comes to using our spiritual gifts is that they are motivated by love for God and for those to whom we minister.

ILLUSTRATION – Back in the 1970s this issue was very divisive in the city where I served as a pastor. I remember one wise pastor saying, "I don't know why everybody is so eager about speaking in other tongues. Most of us can't control the one that we have."

There is to be unity in the church, as well as diversity of gifts. And the only way unity can exist in the midst of diversity is when love is the priority. In Corinth there were church members who thought only of their own satisfaction and needs. So they exercised their spiritual gift of speaking in tongues without any regard for its effects on other church members.

TWO OBJECTIVES FOR THE CHURCH:

- **<u>Edify</u> believers (v.12)**

  1 Corinthians 14:12 (NIV) - So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.

- **<u>Evangelize</u> the lost (vv.24-25)**

  1 Corinthians 14:24-25 (NIV) - But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, [25] and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"

THREE POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS:

Note: Let me give you three views of the whole matter of speaking in tongues. Reputable, conservative scholars look at this in different ways. I'll tell you my opinion, but I'm not going to fall on my sword over this.

VIEW #1 - All the references to "speaking in tongues" in the New Testament refer to existing languages.

This viewpoint holds that one with this gift has the supernatural ability to speak an existing language that they don't know. This is what happened at Pentecost recorded in Acts 2. Remember the believers were together in a house praying when suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

What was this? Because it was the feast of Pentecost, there were Jews in Jerusalem from all over that part of the world where all kinds of different languages were spoken. But miraculously when the crowd gathered they were bewildered because each one heard the believers declaring the wonders of God speaking in his own language.

It would be like you going to a worship service in India where pastor speaks in Hindi, but you understand perfectly what he is saying … you hear it in English. That would be a miracle that someone could do that.

Well one viewpoint, held by some reputable scholars, is that the references to the gift of tongues here in I Corinthians 14 is this same phenomenon. It wasn't edifying to the church because probably no one in the congregation understood when someone stood up to speak in, say, Arabic. So all the mentions of "tongues" here in I Corinthians refer to the same kind of thing that happened in Acts 2 where people were supernaturally enabled to speak in other languages that they didn't know.

VIEW #2 – I Corinthians 14 contrasts speaking in existing languages and paganistic ecstatic utterances.

So the Acts 2 references to tongues are the speaking of an existing language by people who did not know the language. The references to tongues in I Corinthians 12 and 14 are split between two kinds of tongues. Sometimes Paul is talking about actual languages (references in the plural) and other times Paul is talking about what I would call "paganistic ecstatic utterances" (references in the singular). These ecstatic utterances were brought by the Corinthians out of their pagan worship practices, but have no place in Christian worship experiences. So if the person speaking is speaking an actual language, fine. They must simply make sure that there is someone to interpret. And it the person speaking is using ecstatic utterances, then they are to cease from that all together; it doesn't belong in a Christian gathering.

And that's a viewpoint held by some very reputable scholars.

VIEW #3 – I Corinthians 14 describes a Spirit-inspired "prayer language" distinct from existing languages.

> The speaking in tongues referred to in I Corinthians 14 is different from the tongues referred to in Acts 2. Acts 2 refers speaking known languages. But what was happening in I Corinthians 14 was primarily ecstatic utterances for the purpose of praise and prayer. It is a legitimate gift of the Holy Spirit, but is largely overused and inappropriately used, with no interpreter. The gift itself is not wrong, but the Corinthians, like many churches today, were using it inappropriately and in a confusing way.

In my opinion, I think this viewpoint follows a straightforward reading of Scripture and is probably what the case was in Corinth. But again, I'm not falling on my sword over this.

So there are three possible interpretations. But there are some underlying guidelines for public worship that apply to all churches, whether the gift of tongues is common or not.

FOUR GUIDELINES FOR WORSHIP: (Let's just read through the verses again and find what guidelines the Lord would have for us.)

1. DON'T JUST <u>THINK</u> OF <u>YOURSELF</u> (vv.2-5).

You see, the problem with the Corinthians is that it was all about them. They didn't really care what edified other believers in the church gathering. All they could think about was what they wanted out of the experience. Tongue-speakers were all wrapped up in what they got out of the experience, and they had no regard for what was really edifying to others in the church.

1 Corinthians 14:2 (NIV) - For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit.

1 Corinthians 14:4 (NIV) - He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.

1 Corinthians 14:5 (NIV) - I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.

Paul had no intention of <u>depreciating</u> the gift of tongues; he was simply interested in <u>appreciating</u> the gift of prophecy. In a church gathering the gift of prophecy was greatly to be preferred to un-interpreted tongues simply because the former built up others.

Whatever aspect of worship we talk about, the point is not just what you like, what you prefer, or what edifies you. Don't just think about yourself. Think about how God would want to touch the people around you.

ILLUSTRATION – I told you a few weeks ago about an experience Nan and I had worshipping in a service at the National Cathedral in Washington DC. It was a very unusual kind of worship experience … very meditative, almost monastic. And I was really struggling to worship, but I looked over and there was a woman who was sitting on the steps coming down into the chapel, and she was obviously absorbed in the Lord. So I began to think, if she's getting something out of this, what is God trying to say to me.

2. <u>INTELLIGIBLE</u> IS PREFERABLE (vv.6-11,18-19,23).

1 Corinthians 14:6 (NIV) - Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction?

I get more out of something that I understand. If someone is speaking in tongues without an interpreter, I don't understand what their saying.

Now jump down to vv.7-11 where there are 3 illustrations given:

- **v.7 - Musical instruments that play no melody** (like an orchestra warming up)
- **v.8 - A bugle that doesn't sound a distinct call**
- **vv.9-11 - A language that no one can understand**

And if you jump over to vv.18-19 you see Paul summing it up:

1 Corinthians 14:18-19 (NIV) - I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. [19] But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.

3. ENGAGE YOUR <u>SPIRIT</u> AND YOUR <u>MIND</u> (vv.13-17).

1 Corinthians 14:13 (NIV) - For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says.

1 Corinthians 14:14 (NIV) - For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.

"unfruitful" – lit. "useless"

1 Corinthians 14:15 (NIV) - So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind.

This is what Jesus spoke about to the Samaritan woman in John 4:23-24.

John 4:23-24 (NIV) - Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. 24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

1 Corinthians 14:16 (NIV) - If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying?

"Amen" is a Hebrew word that means "this is most certainly true!"

1 Corinthians 14:17 (NIV) - You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.

Your mind and your spirit are two poles of your spiritual battery. You need for both to be engaged. When we worship, you need to worship with your spirit and with your mind.

ILLUSTRATION – Wizard of Oz worship – Remember the Mr. Scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz? His problem was this … "If I only had a brain." And that's where some worshippers are. They want to be in a worship experience where they feel something, and so they are drawn to music that moves them emotionally in their spirit and in their heart. But they forget that we must love the Lord with all of our mind … we should think on certain things.

And then there was another character, Mr. Tin Man. Remember his issue was … "If I only had a heart." There are worshippers who want no heart in worship, just head. They just want to think about things, and that is certainly appropriate. God doesn't ask us to check our brains at the door when we come to church. But understand that God wants to get through the brain to your heart. He wants to stir you and move you.

So we are to worship in a way that engages the head and the heart (the spirit).

4. THERE SHOULD BE <u>ORDER</u> IN THE CHURCH (vv.26-40).

1 Corinthians 14:26 (NIV) - What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.

A WORD TO TONGUE SPEAKERS - **1 Corinthians 14:27-28**

A WORD TO PROPHETS - **1 Corinthians 14:29-33a**

A WORD TO WOMEN - **1 Corinthians 14:33b-35**

A WORD ABOUT AUTHORITY - **1 Corinthians 14:36-38**

READ - **1 Corinthians 14:39-40 (NIV) - Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. 40 But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.**

CONCLUSION

ILLUSTRATION – What happens when we worship the way we should in spirit and in truth … with the spirit and with the mind. I recently read an article that appeared in the magazine Today's Christian. The article was about a Chinese Christian leader by the name of Brother Zhong tells this story:

I was attending a training course for my house church network's council members and youth leaders. The Public Security Bureau (PSB) raided us the first day. All the leaders were arrested.
The prison authorities shaved our heads and interrogated us. We were warned that the hardened inmates would beat us. So with much trepidation, another brother and I entered our cell. We were greeted by the sight of 16 other inmates, lined up in two rows and thumping their fists. My heart beat rapidly as I sent prayers up to God. The leader of the gang asked, "Why are you here?" "Because we are Christians," I replied. "You don't beat people up?" "No," I assured him. "Do you sing?" "Yes," I answered. The leader ordered me to sing a song. I wept as I sang. The Holy Spirit moved in our midst, and by the time I finished singing, every prisoner was also in tears. To my shock, the gang leader then asked to hear the gospel. After that, my cellmates hungered to hear the gospel every day. One Sunday, we held a worship service. The prison guard demanded to know who was behind it. He threatened to punish everyone if no one spoke up. I stood up and confessed. I was forced to remove my clothes and stand at an inclined angle to the wall. The gang leader couldn't bear it anymore. He asked to be punished with me. All the others volunteered to do the same. The infuriated guard stormed out. I was moved by my cellmates' act. One of them, who had been there for three years, became a believer that day."