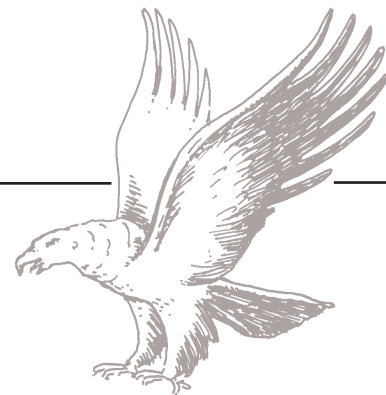


Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



September 22, 2013

Speaking in Tongues

Speaking in tongues was a common spiritual gift in the early church. Some today claim to have that same gift, but a close examination of the New Testament evidence suggests otherwise.

“But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching? . . . Unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air” (1 Cor. 14:6, 9).

Pentecostals claim that their practice of speaking in tongues is a continuation of the tongue speaking described in the New Testament. But a comparison of modern day tongue speaking and the New Testament version reveals several significant differences.

First, the tongues spoken by the early Christians were identifiable languages recognized by native speakers. The Jews who heard the apostles speak in tongues on the day of Pentecost heard “each in our own language in which we were born” (Ac. 2:8-11). On the other hand, linguists who have studied modern tongue speaking have determined that these modern “tongues” are gibberish, having no resemblance to any known language.

The tongue speaking performed by the apostles on the day of Pentecost also illustrates another distinction, namely, that the original phenomenon was a sign “not to those who believe but to unbelievers” (1 Cor. 14:22). That is, it served as a tool for convincing *skeptics* that the speaker was from God. It was not intended as a primary means of reinforcing believers’ faith, as is the case with the modern version.

Third, unlike modern tongue speaking, the original version was tightly regulated to promote the edification of the hearers. Tongue speakers were required to speak one at a time (1 Cor. 14:27a); if no native speakers were present to whom the message was understandable, then an interpreter had to translate the message so others could benefit (v. 27b); and if no interpreter was present, the tongue speaker had to remain silent (v. 28). These restrictions were based on the principle that, in a group setting, if no one could understand the message being spoken, then tongue speaking was pointless and confusing (v. 9-19). Modern tongue speaking, in contrast, is often a

cacophony of noise from multiple speakers—the very thing Paul warned the Corinthians to avoid.

Finally, modern tongue speakers usually claim it to be a gift bequeathed to all believers as evidence of their salvation. But in the early church, tongue speaking was limited in scope. In 1 Cor. 12:27-30, Paul asked a series of rhetorical questions regarding the distribution of a variety of spiritual gifts among believers—including speaking in tongues. The clear implication in these questions is that this gift was not universally administered to all believers, but only to a select number, as the Lord saw fit (v. 7-10).

Speaking in tongues was only one of several gifts provided to the early church to help it grow to maturity as God’s revelation was being completed. Once that revelation was finalized (in the form of the New Testament), the gifts were no longer needed, and passed from the scene (1 Cor. 13:8-10).

Modern tongue speakers may feel a strong emotional attachment to their practice, but it has no basis in Scripture.

– David King