

Isaiah 28 and the Gift of Languages

Overview

In Isa 28:11-13, Isaiah anticipates a time when God will speak to his people Israel in other languages.

- 28:11 sets forth the *fact* of this strange speech, explaining the imitative gibberish of v. 10.
- 28:12 (past tense) gives the *cause* of the speech: the nation has rejected God's offer of rest, expressed in their own language.
- 28:13 (future tense, in spite of AV) gives the *purpose* for the speech: not to increase their understanding, but to harden them in unbelief.

Paul cites Isa 28 in 1 Cor 14:21 to explain to the Corinthians the meaning of the gift of languages described in that chapter and in Acts 2, 10, and 19.¹ He is correcting an abusive enthusiasm for this gift on the part of the Corinthians. Our study of Isaiah is motivated in part by its extensive quotation in the NT, so we should consider his explanation. We will

- review the history of the gift of languages in the book of Acts,
- then consider his explanation.

In both cases, we will see the relevance of the *cause* and *purpose* that Isaiah presents. There is a profound parallel between the historical settings of Isa 28 and the NT.

- In Isa 28, the Gentile kingdoms were about to supplant Israel as a political power. Under David and Solomon, Israel had become the dominant power in the known world. Now Gentile languages would replace Hebrew as the language of civil authority.
- In the NT, Gentile believers supplant Israel as God's spiritual people. Israel had been the people of God, through whom God made himself known to the world. Now the church, made up of all nations without distinction, becomes the people of God, and Gentile languages replace Hebrew as the language of revelation.

Instances of the Gift of Languages in the NT

The gift is mentioned in five places in the NT: Mark 16, Acts 2, 10, 19, and 1 Cor 12-14.

- Acts 2 is the most detailed *description* of the phenomenon
- 1 Cor 12-14 is the most detailed *explanation and instruction* for using the gift
- Mark 16, Acts 10, and Acts 19 are much shorter, but any understanding we develop must fit them. It may also be in view in Acts 8.

In this section, we'll consider the portions other than 1 Cor.

¹ The gift is sometimes called the "gift of tongues," following the KJV. The word simply means "language" (cf. Rev 5:9; 14:6), and it is clear from Acts that the languages in question are known ones.

Mark 16

Our Savior foretold the phenomenon of people speaking with “new tongues.”

Mar 16:17-18 And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; **they shall speak with new tongues**; 18 They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.

Of the signs mentioned here by the Lord, the only one that we do not encounter in the book of Acts is the drinking of poison, and there is an ancient tradition² that one of the apostolic company, Joseph/Justus Barsabas (Acts 1:23), did in fact experience deliverance from such a peril.

Acts 2

This is the most detailed description of the event, and we should consider it in some detail.

1 And when the day of Pentecost was fully come,--This was one of the three great pilgrimage feasts (the others being Unleavened Bread and Tabernacles), when every Jewish male was required to appear in Jerusalem (Deut 16:16).

they were all with one accord in one place.--Let's set the context. Less than two months before, the Jewish temple hierarchy had decisively rejected their own Messiah. Instead of accepting him as their king, they insisted, “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15), and persuaded the Romans to crucify him as a political threat. The Lord then rose from the dead, appeared to his followers, and instructed them,

Luk 24:46-49 Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: 47 And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 And ye are witnesses of these things. 49 And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high.

They are to be witnesses, but first, they need the divine power. So, after his ascent, they are not out preaching, but gathered together, obediently waiting for this promise:

Act 1:14 These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication,

2 And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. 3 And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost,--Now the promise of Luke 24 is realized.

and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.--The Spirit enabled the disciples to speak in other languages that they had not learned.

5 And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.--Pentecost was one of the three pilgrimage feasts, when every Jewish male was required to come to Jerusalem. Not every Jewish male obeyed, but the feast did draw the most pious Jews from every nation.

² Eusebius book 3 chapter 39 reports a record by Papias (AD 70-155)

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One might think that this phenomenon would be a great boost to spreading the gospel among these pilgrims. But note the words that Luke uses to describe their response.

6 Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language.--The languages that the disciples spoke were known human languages. But the result wasn't increased understanding. It was confusion.

7 And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans? 8 And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?--Their focus is not on the content of the speech, but on its form. They had come from afar to affirm the centrality of Jerusalem. They perhaps looked with envy on those who lived in the land, who could easily come to the Holy City. They expected, when they came, to worship God in his own language, in Hebrew. And now even the locals are speaking everything else!

9 Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea,³ and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, 10 Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.--The pilgrims expected to hear the wonderful works of God when they came to Jerusalem—from the priests in the temple, speaking Hebrew. They were, after all, Jews, who valued their Jewish heritage enough to make the pilgrimage. In their synagogues at home they could discuss God's works in their own language. But the real revelation is in Hebrew, and their effort to come to Jerusalem affirms their reverence for the basic tradition. Surely, when Messiah comes, he and his followers will speak Hebrew. Yet now they hear this message in every other language.

We have often observed that God characterizes himself overwhelmingly in linguistic terms. He speaks the world into existence. He reveals himself primarily through language, not non-verbal hallucinations. He gives man language and insists that we use it responsibly, speaking to him, singing his praises, speaking truth to one another. There is no stronger way for such a God to emphasize the shift from a Jewish people of God to a Gentile church than by starting to speak in Gentile languages.

12 And they were all amazed, and were in doubt, saying one to another, What meaneth this? 13 Others mocking said, These men are full of new wine.--Note the words “amazed,” “doubt,” “mocking.” What is the result of this miraculous speech? You might think it would help these Jews of the diaspora to understand better. But they cannot accept that true revelation will come in other languages. God speaks Hebrew. What business have these Galileans proclaiming his works pagan languages?

Recall the *cause* and *purpose* that Isaiah assigns to the foreign languages in ch. 28:11-13.

- It is caused by rejecting God's promised rest. Less than two months before, the nation has rejected its Messiah, who offered them rest.
- Its purpose is to bring judgment. The pilgrims now are “confounded,” “amazed,” “in doubt,” and “mocking.”

This is not all that happened on the day of Pentecost. In vv. 14-47, Peter spoke to the crowd in the

³ The statement from those who heard reports on all the languages that they heard. It took no miracle to produce speech in the language of Judaea (whether Hebrew or Aramaic), and Peter likely used this language in his following sermon.

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common language, and 3000 were saved (v. 41). The languages brought confusion. Systematic exposition brought understanding. We will see this same contrast later in 1 Cor 14.

Other References in Acts

This miracle reappears in two, or perhaps three, other settings in Acts. The first is at the salvation of Cornelius, the first Gentile to come into the church.

Act 10:44-48 While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. 45 And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. 46 For they heard them **speak with tongues**, and magnify God. Then answered Peter, 47 Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? 48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord.

The event was significant in two ways.

First, “they of the circumcision” were present. This was a party within the early church that insisted that Gentiles become Jews before they become Christians. They would approve if Cornelius spoke Hebrew. Indeed, he is a God-fearer, sympathetic with the Jewish faith, and might very well speak Hebrew. But this proliferation of Gentile languages is an offense. Why does God insist on speaking other languages? They need to learn that God is now working outside of Israel.

Second, note the conclusion that Peter draws from the event. These Gentiles have experienced exactly the same thing that the Jews did on the day of Pentecost. There is no difference between their experiences. Therefore they must truly be partakers of the New Covenant.

The second event involves Jews who did not make the trip to Jerusalem.

Act 19:1-8 And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples, 2 He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost. 3 And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism. 4 Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. 5 When they heard *this*, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 6 And when Paul had laid *his* hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; **and they spake with tongues**, and prophesied. 7 And all the men were about twelve. 8 And he went into the synagogue, and spake boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God.

It has been suggested that the gift of languages was also part of the conversion of the Samaritans in Acts 8, since in some way the coming of the Holy Spirit was outwardly visible.

Act 8:14-17 Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John: 15 Who, when they were come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost: 16 (For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) 17 Then laid they *their* hands

on them, and **they received the Holy Ghost.**

The two observations about the episode with Cornelius apply to Ephesus and Samaria as well. First, there are Jews present, who need to realize that God is now revealing himself outside of Judaism. Second, those who are being saved are likely to be considered second-class citizens. The Gentiles were certainly on the outside. The orthodoxy of the Samaritans was questioned repeatedly, and Jews who didn't care enough to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem would be marginalized as well. There was a persistent struggle in the early church between the party of the circumcision, which wanted all Christians to start by becoming devout Jews, and the teaching of Paul that did not require this. If the experience of these second-class groups had been at all different from that of the disciples on Pentecost, the circumcision party would have been strengthened in their position.

After the conversion of Cornelius, Peter makes this very argument when the Jewish Christians at Jerusalem criticize him for “[going] in to men uncircumcised, and [eating] with them,” Acts 11:3. He responds by reporting first the vision that sent him to Cornelius, then the result of his preaching:

Act 11:15-17 And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning. 16 Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost. 17 Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?

1 Cor 12-14

Acts 2 is the most detailed *description* of the gift in the NT, but 1 Cor 12-14 offers the most *explanation* of it. The section is chiastic:⁴ in addition to corresponding introduction/conclusion and transitions, the main outer members discuss the role of gifts in the church, viewed first as an organic body (ch. 12) and then in terms of its meetings (ch. 14), while the central chapter (13) focuses on the spiritual fruit of love.

Though Corinth is a Greek city, the church there grew up in close contact with the Jews. Paul began his ministry there in the synagogue (Acts 18:4). He lived in a house adjacent to the synagogue (18:7). One of the first converts was the chief ruler of the synagogue (18:8). There would naturally be great Jewish interest in the affairs of the young congregation, and these Jews, like those in Jerusalem, Samaria, and Ephesus, need to learn that God is now working through the Gentiles.

The introduction to the section (“Now concerning...”) indicates that this is a topic that the Corinthians introduced in their letter to Paul. They were excited about the manifestation of the gift in their assembly. He seeks to set it in context. As he progresses through the section, he constrains the use of the gift more and more.

1 Cor 12-13

He begins ch. 12 by emphasizing that this gift is only one among many gifts, just as each organ of the

4 For detailed analysis, see my outline of 1 Cor, available at <http://www.cyber-chapel.org/sermons/1cor/notes/1CorOutline.pdf>

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body is only one part of the whole.

1Co 12:8-11 For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; 9 To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; 10 To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of **tongues**; to another the interpretation of tongues: 11 But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.

By the end of the chapter, he is more direct: the ability to speak in other languages is not the most important of the gifts. In fact, it comes last in line. It is not something that a person should aspire to receive.

1Co 12:28-31 God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of **tongues**. 29 *Are* all apostles? *are* all prophets? *are* all teachers? *are* all workers of miracles? 30 Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with **tongues**? do all interpret? 31 But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way.

Then in ch. 13, he outlines the “more excellent way”: it is more important to manifest the *spiritual fruit* of love (Gal 5:22) than any particular *spiritual gift*.

1 Co13:1, 8 Though I speak with the **tongues** of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become *as* sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. ... 8 Charity never faileth: but whether *there be* prophecies, they shall fail; whether *there be* **tongues**, they shall cease; whether *there be* knowledge, it shall vanish away.

1 Cor 14

In ch. 14, he returns to the gifts:

1Co 14:1 Follow after charity, and desire spiritual *gifts*, but rather that ye may prophesy.

The focus throughout this chapter is on two gifts, prophecy (vv. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 22, 24, 29, 31, 32, 37, 39) and the gift of languages (vv. 5, 6, 18, 21, 22, 23, 39). Prophecy here (and elsewhere) is not primarily the foretelling of the future, but the speaking forth of the mind of God. Its analog in the modern church, now that God has given us a written New Testament, is teaching. Paul's point is that one should prefer prophecy (proclamation) to tongues. He develops this theme in three steps:

1. vv. 2-19 argue logically for the preference of prophecy on the basis of its effects on the hearer.
2. vv. 20-25 develop the same point on the basis of Scripture, our text in Isaiah 28.
3. vv. 26-40 regulate the use of these gifts when the saints meet together.

The Preference in 14:1-19

vv. 2-5 summarize this section: in the assembly of God's people, prophecy (preaching) is preferable to tongues in regard to its audience, its function, and its prestige.

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v. 13 gives the conclusion of the whole section, supported by two reasons, one on either side. If tongues are used in the assembly, they must be interpreted.

The first reason (6-12) is from the nature of language. The purpose is for the hearer to understand the speaker. This section presents the same dichotomy we saw in Acts 2: tongues confused the hearers, but Peter's proclamation (a form of prophecy) brought understanding.

The second reason (14-19) is from the nature of man. We are both mind and spirit, and these are intended to work together. it is inappropriate to turn one off and let the other run unchecked.

The Explanation in 14:20-25

Paul often begins with a logical explanation of a position, followed by a Scriptural foundation, and he does that now. 14:20-25 sets forth the Scriptural foundation for this gift, based on Isa 28.

1Co 14:20-25 Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men.--For Paul, correct conduct must be based on correct understanding. This echoes a concern of Isaiah's; recall 27:11,

Isa 27:11 *it is* a people of no understanding: therefore he that made them will not have mercy on them, and he that formed them will shew them no favour.

21 In the law it is written, With *men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord.*--He quotes v. 11 and the last part of v. 12, skipping over the first part of 12. In addition, he makes a slight change in the second part of his quotation. The result is a paraphrase that captures the entire passage in compact form. To see this, note the tenses in the original: 28:11 and 13 are future (in spite of the KJV "was"), looking ahead to the coming of the strange languages and their *purpose*. 28:12 is past, describing the *cause* of the languages. Paul's quotation of the second half of v. 12 turns it from past (part of the cause) to future (where it becomes a paraphrase of the purpose in v. 13). Thus his quotation effectively brackets the entire three verses.

22 Wherefore tongues—Paul explains the NT gift as a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. In Isaiah's immediate context, the foreign utterances are spoken by the invaders, the Assyrians and Babylonians. At Pentecost, they were spoken by the Lord's Jewish disciples—but the effect was much the same. One would expect the coming of the Jewish Messiah to be announced in Hebrew—and it was, by the Messiah himself. But when they rejected his message, God caused the message to come in the languages of the Gentiles, just as in Isaiah's day. The grafting of Gentiles into the people of God, so that the Gentiles replace the Jews as the core of the church, is the spiritual analog to the political event of the invasion and conquest of Israel by Assyrians and Babylonians. Paul's argument here is closely tied to that in Rom 11 about the two olive trees, compare 11:11,

through [Israel's] fall salvation *is come* unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy.

22 Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying *serveth* not for them that believe not, but for them which believe.--This conclusion does not follow from the portions that he quotes, but it does follow from the first part of 28:12, defining the "this people" of v. 11:

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Isa 28:11-12 ...this people, 12 To whom he said, This *is* the rest *wherewith* ye may cause the weary to rest; and this *is* the refreshing: yet they would not hear.

Paul says that the addressees of this speech are unbelievers. Isaiah says that they are those who reject God's offer of rest, that is, unbelievers. The prophecy and the fulfillment align. Tongues are a disciplinary tool, used by God to chastise unbelieving Israel for her rejection of the Messiah.

In the context of Paul's argument, this point is critical. The Corinthians are proud that people speak supernaturally with foreign languages in their meetings. Paul has just explained logically that speech in a foreign language doesn't edify anybody, while prophecy does. Now he nails the point home from Isaiah: these utterances were never intended for the ears of believers. They are a tool of judgment, a means of blinding those who have rejected the truth.

23 If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in *those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad?*--Recall the verdict of the Jews on the day of Pentecost, "These men are full of new wine" (Acts 2:13).

At first, this verse seems at odds with v. 22. If this speech is for unbelievers, why do they lead them to reject the truth?⁵ But this result is consistent with Isaiah's claim that the purpose of the strange speech is (v. 13) "that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken." In both OT and NT, these utterances come to blind those who have rejected God's offer of rest in their own language.

24 But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or *one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: 25 And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on *his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth.**--Prophecy is different. It is not a sign to blind those who have rejected truth, but a gift to those who have ears to hear. If our concern is to bring blessing to those around us, we will heed Paul's advice:

1Co 14:5 I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for greater *is* he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying.

1Co 14:39 covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues.

Tongues had a place in God's plan, to blind the Jews who rejected God's offer of the rest in the Messiah. But Paul urged the Corinthians to prefer the gift of prophecy. Because of the close contact between the church and the synagogue in Corinth, it was appropriate for God to remind the Jews, through a plethora of foreign languages, that he was working outside of the Jewish people. Thus Paul, in spite of his emphasis on prophecy, emphasizes, "Forbid not to speak with tongues" (1 Cor 14:39). Today, when it is doubtful that the judicial purpose of the gift is relevant at all, there is even more reason to prefer prophesying to this gift.

Even if the gift is still active today, it is a fearful thing, a tool of judicial blindness. Its casual use as a means of praise in gatherings of God's people is like someone waving a loaded gun around in a crowded room. It shows an ignorance of the awful purpose and power of this sacred gift.

⁵ This contradiction seemed so strong to J.B. Phillips that he reversed the order of v. 22 in his translation, *The NT in Modern English*: "That means that tongues are a sign of God's power, not for those who are unbelievers, but to those who already believe. Preaching the word of God, on the other hand, is a sign of God's power to those who do not believe rather than to believers."

The Guidelines in 14:26-40 and Our Practice Today

In the last section of this chapter, Paul gives guidelines for the exercise of tongues and prophecy in the assembly of saints.

In the light of Isa 28 and 1 Cor 14, it is difficult to see why God would continue to give the gift of tongues today. It was a sign of judgment to a Jewish nation that rejected its offer of rest, a sign that they would lose their preeminence as the people of God to the Gentiles. That transition is long past now.

Still, Paul instructs, “Forbid not to speak with tongues” (14:39). Our position as a church is that if someone should feel led to speak in a foreign language in a meeting, we will not forbid the practice outright. But we will insist that it follow the guidelines in 1 Cor 14:

- Only two people, or at the most three, may exercise the gift in a meeting.
- They must speak one at a time.
- What they say must be interpreted.
- Only brothers may speak; sisters must be silent.

And in fact, in the thirty years of our fellowship together, this has never been an issue.