

Tongues & Interpretation of Tongues (Because of the Gospel)

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, June 18, 2023
PASSAGES	1 Corinthians 14:1-28; Acts 2:1-13; Acts 10:44-46; Acts 19:1-6; 1 Corinthians 12:10; 1 Corinthians 12:27-31; 1 Corinthians 13:1; Isaiah 28:11-12; Romans 8:26-27; Ephesians 6:17-18; Jude 20; Genesis 11:1-9
MESSAGE	Begins at 0:53:22 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

There are two serious, charismatic, Bible-believing readings of the gift of tongues, and Matt taught both of them — carefully, in character, one after the other — instead of telling the congregation which to hold. What he would not leave undecided is the practical part: whichever view is right, Paul's instruction still governs the room, and the gift is never for impressing anybody.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Book studies force a preacher into texts he would rather skip. Matt said plainly that he was preaching on tongues because we are in 1 Corinthians and it would be strange to walk around chapter 14.
- ◆ The interesting question is not cessationist versus continuationist. It is whether tongues is a Spirit-given prayer language no human speaks, or a real human language the speaker happens not to know.
- ◆ Every argument in that debate is an argument about context, not about miracles. Both sides believe the Spirit is doing something; they disagree about what kind of thing he is doing.
- ◆ Paul's rhetorical questions in 1 Corinthians 12 expect the answer no. Not everyone speaks in tongues, and the gift was never a spiritual entrance exam.

- ◆ Matt's own position is that he cannot know — he speaks a fraction of one percent of human languages, so he could not tell a prayer language from Farsi if it were handed to him.
- ◆ The house rules follow Paul, not preference: sort out interpretation before the congregation hears it, not after. Standing someone up and hoping is the lazy version.
- ◆ Pentecost is not the reversal of Babel. Scattering the nations was what God wanted; Pentecost is the next step, the gospel going after them in every language they now speak.

► 0:55:59

Before any of the teaching, Matt took what he called a micro congregational meeting on something nobody had asked about. A church member had posted a documentary on Realm; Matt had commented under it, and he wanted to say the same thing out loud.

Why a church that preaches Jesus still talks about everything else

He gave the opposing argument its best form first. J. Gresham Machen, writing in the 1920s, watched American denominations shift their focus onto morality and social justice and then lose ground on both fronts — no converts and no social change either. Healthy churches, Machen argued, preach the gospel loudly and proudly, grow, plant, and change society through converted hearts. "That's my best argument for why Jesus should be the main deal," Matt said, "and that's why he is the main deal here."

► 0:58:10

And then the turn. You cannot preach Jesus the way Jesus preached him without pricking somebody. He confronted his own culture; so did the apostles Paul sent into pagan cities. Matt reached back to his own message from the previous year — have enemies, love them — and drew the line: the goal was never to avoid upsetting anyone. He told about the trans woman at his martial arts gym who knows he will not wrestle women and asked him, reasonably, which definition of woman he was using. He told her the old-fashioned one. "Everything was fine. It doesn't have to be high energy, high octane. No one has to blow up dynamite." His conclusion: there is no Jesus-only message that leaves the rest of your life untouched.

Starting from zero: the two views worth knowing

► 1:03:23

Matt assumed no one in the room knew anything, which he warned would frustrate some people. The cessationist-versus-continuationist argument he set aside as uninteresting. The live question is what the gift *is*. The Pentecostal view: a personal prayer language, spirit to spirit, that you yourself may not

understand and Google Translate will never render — *glossolalia*. The other view is equally charismatic but holds that tongues are human languages the speaker has not learned — *xenolalia*. An English speaker has an encounter with God and begins praying in Russian; maybe there is a Russian in the room, maybe he is meant to go to Russia.

His method for the hour: read the texts, show how each view handles them, then say where he lands.

The backstory in Acts

► 1:05:41

"And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance."

ACTS 2:1-4 ↗

Matt was careful about what is and is not the gift here. The wind is a sound; the fire is an image. The gift starts at "began to speak." And the crowd that gathers hears each one in his own native language — Parthians, Medes, Elamites, the whole list (Acts 2:5-12).

► 1:07:13

Some Pentecostals read that as a hearing miracle: ecstatic utterance on the platform, translation in the ear. Matt gave the standard reply and clearly found it strong — the text says the Spirit gave *them* utterance, so the miracle sits with the disciples, and a hearing gift would make the separate gift of interpretation redundant. The same pattern recurs at Cornelius's house, where tongues are the evidence that the Spirit has fallen on Gentiles (Acts 10:44-46), and at Ephesus, where Paul lays hands on disciples who had not heard there was a Holy Spirit (Acts 19:1-6).

► 1:09:03

One detail he wanted remembered: Luke wrote Acts after 1 Corinthians was written and circulating, and Luke and Paul travelled together. That becomes an argument later.

Paul's list, and a question with an assumed answer

► 1:11:32

In Paul's catalogue of gifts, tongues and their interpretation sit alongside prophecy and discernment, all apportioned by one Spirit "as he wills" (1 Corinthians 12:10). Then the string of questions — are all apostles, do all speak with tongues, do all interpret (1 Corinthians 12:27–31). "The answer to those is an assumed no on all counts," Matt said.

Chapter 14, read by a Pentecostal

► 1:12:05

"For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit... The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy."

1 CORINTHIANS 14:1–5 ↗

Three things, in character. Not to men but to God — if this were a human language, someone hearing it would be addressed. No one understands: mysteries, not vocabulary. And the speaker builds himself up, which sounds like spirit meeting Spirit.

► 1:14:49

The flute and the bugle that give no distinct note (1 Corinthians 14:6–9) sound like something that is not linguistically decipherable at all. And Paul assumes nobody present will understand (1 Corinthians 14:10–12) — odd in a port city like Corinth, where somebody usually speaks your language.

"For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also."

1 CORINTHIANS 14:13–15 ↗

► 1:15:42

Then Paul's own claim to speak in tongues more than all of them, followed by five intelligible words over ten thousand in a tongue (1 Corinthians 14:18–19) — "kind of a humble brag," Matt said, and also a clear preference. A powerful private tool; a poor public one.

"In the Law it is written, 'By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.' Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers."

1 CORINTHIANS 14:20-22 ↗

Matt untangled what he called one of the most confusing verses in the letter. Paul is quoting [Isaiah 28:11-12](#): Israel would not hear her own prophets in her own language, so God spoke his displeasure through captors who spoke a foreign one. The strange language was the sign of judgment on unbelief. Which is why an outsider walking into a room full of it concludes you are out of your minds (1 Corinthians 14:23-25) — the same reaction as the mockers at Pentecost.

► 1:18:11

"If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God."

1 CORINTHIANS 14:26-28 ↗

Speaking to himself and to God is where the phrase *prayer language* comes from. Add "the tongues of men and of angels" (1 Corinthians 13:1), and the Spirit interceding with groanings too deep for words:

"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."

ROMANS 8:26-27 ↗

Put beside "praying at all times in the Spirit" ([Ephesians 6:17-18](#)) and "praying in the Holy Spirit" as self-edification ([Jude 20](#)), the Pentecostal case is coherent.

► 1:20:21

Matt then stepped out of character to say what he admires. American evangelicals, he said, live in their heads — the Romans Road, the apologetics, "boom, we're making more sense than you." Pentecostals do not have that problem. "They are unashamed. They're letting their hair down spiritually, and that's admirable."

The same chapter, read the other way

► 1:21:16

Back to Acts 2 first, where Luke twice says *tongues* and twice says *dialects* for the same event, then names which dialects. Luke establishes a human context and never revises it. And since Luke and Paul travelled together and ministered together, why would Luke use Paul's vocabulary for an entirely different phenomenon? Why be confusing on purpose?

► 1:23:16

On the drunkenness charge, Matt made a point worth keeping: drunk people slur their own language, they do not switch into gibberish. "So being drunk doesn't mean not making sense per se."

Then the same verses, answered one at a time. "No one understands him" need not be literal — "if I went home and told Mandy nobody understood my sermon, that doesn't mean nobody did." Whether you understand yourself is a moot point, since you could equally fail to understand an angelic tongue or Hungarian. Building yourself up works either way: you are praying praise in Farsi, and it is doing you good while doing nothing for the room.

► 1:27:00

The instruments are an analogy — Paul says so, "so with yourselves." What he actually reestablishes two verses later is that there are many languages in the world and none is without meaning; unintelligibility is about the hearer, not about the species of language. A port city does not mean every visitor speaks every tongue.

► 1:30:07

Isaiah 28 seals it for this view: the Assyrians and Babylonians spoke real human languages. Confusing, foreign, a sign of judgment — and entirely human.

► 1:33:20

And "praying in the Spirit" carries no linguistic freight at all. In Romans 8 it is the Spirit praying, not the Christian, and with groans rather than language. John is "in the Spirit" when a door opens in heaven ([Revelation 4:1–2](#)); Ezekiel is brought out in the Spirit to a valley of bones ([Ezekiel 37:1](#)); the mystery of Christ is revealed to apostles and prophets "in the Spirit" ([Ephesians 3:4–5](#)) — and nobody thinks Hebrew stopped being Hebrew. The Didache uses the phrase three times of prophets speaking plainly to people. The contrast Paul draws is flesh against Spirit ([Romans 8:8–9](#); [Galatians 5:16](#)), not human against non-human.

Does it actually sound crazy?

► 1:38:01

Linguists have put American evangelicals in scanners and concluded they are not speaking any language — too much repetition, no syntax, only sounds from their own tongue. Matt jumped back onto the Pentecostal side to answer: high repetition and no syntax can still be speech. He has stood next to a man whose entire ecstatic vocabulary was "yeah, yeah, yeah," and that man meant something by it. Then, gently, the mirror: "Lord, Father God, we just — God, we just ask, Father God, we just." Diagram that sentence.

► 1:40:32

He ran a small experiment on the room — a few lines of prayer in Spanish, then in Greek with Erasmian pronunciation, then offered to start beeping in Morse code. The Spanish speakers were unbothered. Nobody thought he had gone mad. In the Greek of the New Testament the word covers everything from "he has a demon and is insane" to Festus telling Paul his great learning had driven him mad — closer to eccentric than unhinged.

Where Matt lands, and the house rules

► 1:43:15

He was honest about the weakest Pentecostal argument — the story of the rabbi on the plane who recognises perfect Hebrew is evidence for the *other* view. He was honest about Jackie Pullinger's *Chasing the Dragon* too: praying in a prayer language transformed her ministry, and "we don't build our doctrine on personal experience."

► 1:44:33

His own conclusion is a shrug with a reason behind it. "Unless I become C-3PO, I'll never know." He speaks less than half of one percent of human languages. If someone prays over him in something other than Spanish, Greek or Hebrew, he is lost — and neither view, he pointed out, embraces deliberate gibberish. A prayer language is still a language. Not knowing its rules, he cannot tell the difference.

So the rules at Hope are practical. When the whole room prays at once, pray however it comes — nobody is listening to you, and the cautions do not apply. If you want to bring a tongue to the congregation, expect questions: do you know what you are saying, do you know the language, is anyone here who can interpret. Then it gets sorted out to the side first.

► 1:47:43

Some churches do the reverse — stage first, tongue second, hope for an interpreter third. "That would be failing to grasp Paul's point. He literally said don't do it that way." And the motive underneath it got named: "We don't need credibility. We don't need to re-up on our Pentecostal bona fides." You should not feel more spiritual the further you get from Paul's instruction.

Pentecost is not Babel undone

► 1:48:19

Matt closed by dismantling a line he hears often. At Babel, humanity was told to fill the earth and instead gathered in one place, impressed with itself, building upward. God confused the language and they scattered — which is exactly what he had asked for. "If Pentecost is the reversal of Babel, then God did something he wanted, and then undid it. Why would he undo the good thing that he did?"

► 1:49:17

Step one, they would not spread out. Step two, they did, speaking many languages. Step three is Acts 2: now that the nations are scattered and speaking, God pours out his Spirit and says this gospel is for all of them. Not a retreat to one tongue, but an advance into every one of them, so that the knowledge of his glory covers the earth as the waters cover the sea (Habakkuk 2:14). "I will make that message known however way I need to, because it's unstoppable."

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- Acts 2:1–4
- Acts 2:5–12
- Acts 10:44–46
- Acts 19:1–6
- 1 Corinthians 12:10
- 1 Corinthians 12:27–31
- 1 Corinthians 14:1–5
- 1 Corinthians 14:6–9
- 1 Corinthians 14:10–12
- 1 Corinthians 14:13–15
- 1 Corinthians 14:18–19
- 1 Corinthians 14:20–22
- Isaiah 28:11–12
- 1 Corinthians 14:23–25
- 1 Corinthians 14:26–28
- 1 Corinthians 13:1
- Romans 8:26–27
- Ephesians 6:17–18
- Jude 20
- Revelation 4:1–2
- Ezekiel 37:1
- Ephesians 3:4–5
- Romans 8:8–9
- Galatians 5:16
- Genesis 11:1–9
- Habakkuk 2:14

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Matt argued that preaching Jesus faithfully will unavoidably bother people. Where have you softened something true because of who might be upset by it?
2. Which of the two views of tongues did you walk in holding, and which argument against it was the hardest to answer?
3. Matt said that as a teenager he was afraid to mock something he did not understand, in case it was God. Where is your instinct toward the unfamiliar in church — curiosity, suspicion, or ridicule?
4. Paul says the gift builds up the one who uses it and does nothing for anyone else unless it is interpreted. How does that reorder what you count as spiritual maturity?
5. If Pentecost is Babel's next step rather than its reversal, what does that say about who around you this week is meant to hear the gospel in a language they actually understand?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5U4bA8GNa58&t=3202s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.