

The Gift of Tongues

1) What is the gift of tongues?

A) The word “tongue” comes from the Greek *glossa* which is used in the NT to signify either the tongue in a person’s mouth (e.g., Mark 7:33) or the language which a person speaks (e.g., Acts 2:11). The word “language” comes from the Greek *dialektos* which is used in the NT to signify the particular language spoken by an individual (e.g., Acts 22:2).

B) The close connection between *glossa* and *dialektos* is seen in Acts 2 where the disciples “were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues (*glossa*) as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language (*dialektos*)” (Acts 2:4–6). Throughout the NT, *glossa* and *dialektos* are consistently used to refer to human languages.¹

(1) The single exception to this usage is found in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians: “If I speak in the tongues (*glossa*) of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor 13:1). This verse informs us that there is a language which is spoken by angels. It follows that this “tongue” is unintelligible to humans without interpretation.

(2) There is no support in Scripture for the notion that tongues is ecstatic speech consisting of syllables that sound like nonsense or gibberish. Speaking in tongues is always presented in the context of a specific language, even if the language is angelic.²

C) The word “gift” comes from the Greek *charisma* which is used in the NT to signify that which is given freely to another (e.g., Rom 5:15). When used in context with the word “spiritual” or “Spirit,” it means a Spirit-given ability, capacity or skill that is given to a believer in order for them to carry out their function within the body of Christ.³

D) In conclusion, the “gift of tongues” is the Spirit-given ability to speak in a language or languages⁴ which are either unknown to the speaker (Acts 2:4–6) or which the

¹ On *dialektos*, see Acts 1:19; 2:6, 8; 21:40; 22:2; 26:14. On *glossa*, see Mark 16:17; Acts 2:4, 11; 10:46; 19:6; 1 Cor 12:10, 28, 30; 13:1, 8; 14:2, 4–6, 13–14, 18–19, 22–23, 26–27, 39; Rev 5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15.

² Carson comments: “On balance, then, the evidence favors the view that Paul thought the gift of tongues was a gift of real languages, that is, languages that were cognitive, whether of men or of angels. Certainly tongues in Acts exercise some different *functions* from those in 1 Corinthians; but there is no substantial evidence that suggests Paul thought the two were *essentially* different.” D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Baker, 1987), p. 83 (italics in the original).

³ For examples of this usage, see the spiritual gift lists in Romans 12:3–8, 1 Corinthians 12–14, Ephesians 4:11–16, and 1 Peter 4:10–11.

⁴ Both the singular and plural forms of “tongue” occur in 1 Cor 12–14. The plural form suggests that the “gift” of languages is really “gifts of languages” (cf. 1 Cor 12:28). To speak in a tongue is therefore

speaker is unable to interpret for others apart from the gift of interpretation (1 Cor 14:13). The language itself may or may not be understood by those who are listening (Acts 2:8; 1 Cor 14:2).

2) What is the gift of the interpretation of tongues?

- A) The gift of interpretation is the Spirit-given ability to comprehend a language which the hearer did not previously understand and communicate the meaning of what was said to others (e.g., 1 Cor 14:27). The gift of tongues and the gift of interpretation are complementary gifts, and they are meant to be used together for the edification of the church.

3) What is the purpose of the gift of tongues?

- A) The gift of tongues is a spiritual gift. Spiritual gifts are given by God to the church so it can function as He intended. Specifically, we see the following purposes for the gift of tongues:
- (1) To edify the church (1 Cor 12:7–10; 1 Pet 4:10; Eph 4:11–16). Paul said that spiritual gifts were intended for “the common good,” and Peter said that we should use our gifts to “serve one another.” We should always use our gifts to build up the body of Christ.
 - (2) To communicate truth (Acts 2:4–11). The Jews listening to Peter and the other disciples said, “we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God” (v. 11).
 - (3) To fulfill prophecy (Acts 2:14–21). Peter claimed that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which was manifested as “divided tongues as of fire” and “other tongues,” was a fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel 2:28–32.
 - (4) To authenticate the presence, ministry and work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44–48; 19:1–7).
 - (a) In Acts 10, Cornelius and his household spoke in tongues, “and the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles” (Acts 10:45).
 - (b) In Acts 19, the Ephesian disciples spoke in tongues after being baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. This confirmed the genuine saving work of the Spirit in connection with the gospel message, and it served as a sign that the disciples had truly received the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:2).
 - (c) It should be noted that speaking in tongues did not accompany the conversion of most believers in the early church, nor does Scripture designate it as *the* sign of true saving faith (see Acts 2:41; 8:14–17, 26–39; 16:25–34). While every believer in Christ has the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:9; 1 Cor

to speak in a language which one has not learned. To speak in tongues would be to speak in multiple languages one has not learned.

12:13; Eph 1:13–14), not every believer speaks in tongues (1 Cor 12:29–31).

(5) To be a sign to sinners (1 Cor 14:21–25). Paul said that speaking in tongues could act as a sign to unbelievers that what was being spoken was from God. As support for this claim, he quoted Isaiah 28:11–12 in which God promised to “speak” to his people through “a foreign tongue.” The Assyrians later fulfilled this prophecy, and their language (heard by the captive Israelites) confirmed that God’s message through Isaiah was true. In the same way, speaking in tongues is a sign to sinners that the message of the gospel is from God (cf. Acts 2:6, 37–41).

(6) To edify the speaker (1 Cor 14:4). Paul said that the one who speaks in tongues “builds himself up,” that is, he edifies himself. This means that there is a spiritual strengthening that comes from the act of speaking in tongues.⁵

B) In conclusion, it’s important to remember that although spiritual gifts can be personally edifying, they were not given so we could use them on ourselves. Rather, they were given so we could encourage and build up other believers in the faith (1 Cor 14:5).

4) What are the biblical guidelines for speaking in tongues in a public gathering of believers?

A) The gift of tongues is designed to strengthen and edify the body of Christ. However, the Holy Spirit gave strict guidelines on how the gift is to be used in a church service:

(1) The number of individuals which may speak in tongues is limited to two or at most three: “If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three” (1 Cor 14:27a).

(2) Each individual must speak in turn: “each in turn” (1 Cor 14:27b). There should never be more than one person speaking in tongues at a time.

(3) Each statement must be interpreted for the edification of the church. If there is no one present with the gift of interpretation, “let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God” (1 Cor 14:27c–28).

(4) If the number of individuals does not exceed three and there is an interpreter present, the use of tongues must not be forbidden: “So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues” (1 Cor 14:39). That being said, each individual should submit themselves to the leadership of the elders—they should not insist on exercising their right (cf. Eph 5:21; 1 Pet 5:5; Heb 13:17).

(5) The principles of propriety and order must always govern the use of tongues in a

⁵ Paul does not comment on the nature of this edification. Since 1 Cor 14:1–4 makes edification dependent on understanding and 1 Cor 14:13 directs the speaker to pray that he may interpret, it may be that the speaker understands his intent (“giving thanks”; 1 Cor 14:16–17), yet does not understand all the words he is speaking (1 Cor 14:14). An intent to give thanks would be self-edifying, but without interpretation, others cannot join in and say “Amen” (1 Cor 14:16).

church service: “But all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Cor 14:40).

- B) If the use of the gift of tongues does not follow the Spirit-given guidelines above, then it is not in harmony with God’s will and can be used by the Devil to hinder the cause of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 14:23, 33, 40).

5) Are all believers given the gift of tongues?

- A) No, the gift of tongues is not bestowed on every believer. Paul said, “Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? (1 Cor 12:30). The answer to this question is an implied ‘No.’ God has given different gifts to different people so the body of Christ would have everything it needs to function properly and grow.

(1) When Paul said, “Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy” (1 Cor 14:5a), he was not saying the Corinthians all needed to receive the gift of tongues. He was merely expressing his approval of the gift itself and acknowledging its value (cf. 1 Cor 14:18). However, the gift of prophesy, which edifies the entire body of believers, is the greater gift, and so Paul encouraged them to seek and use those gifts which have the ability to influence and affect the entire church (such gifts are called “greater” for this reason).

(2) The gift of tongues can only edify the church if it is complemented by the gift of interpretation. However, when interpreted, tongues can qualify as a “greater” gift since it is being used to edify the entire body of believers. Paul was not denigrating the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians 14, he was simply clarifying how it must be used in order to properly benefit the church.

6) Is the gift of tongues a necessary proof of true faith?

- A) No, the gift of tongues is not a necessary proof of true faith. This is confirmed by the fact that not every believer is given the gift of tongues (1 Cor 12:30). If we required everyone to be able to speak in tongues before we acknowledged them to be a true Christian, we would grieve the Holy Spirit, disregard the Scriptures and do great harm to sincere believers.

B) While the church is commanded to “earnestly desire the higher gifts” (1 Cor 12:31) and the individual “who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret” (1 Cor 14:13), there is no guarantee that every request for a particular gift will be answered in the affirmative. The gift of tongues is not a sign of spiritual maturity or true faith and should not be sought as one. Indeed, the church in which speaking in tongues was most prevalent was the Corinthian church, and its members were rebuked by Paul for being fleshly, unloving, and immature (1 Cor 3:1–3).

C) Speaking in tongues without love is an empty and ineffectual use of the gift. Paul said, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor 13:1). He concluded by saying, “Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. 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” (1 Cor 14:1–2).

D) Churches who place an excessive focus on speaking in tongues will find themselves in the same state as the Corinthians. It is clear from Paul's letter that they were obsessed with speaking in tongues and had neglected the other gifts (1 Cor 12–13). This led to confusion, disorder, division and pride.

7) Is speaking in tongues an uncontrollable phenomenon?

A) No, speaking in tongues is *not* uncontrollable. Paul's instructions on the use of tongues in the church demonstrate that an individual with the gift of tongues is able to remain silent: "But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God" (1 Cor 14:28).

8) Is the gift of tongues still being given by the Holy Spirit?

A) Some claim that the "miracle gifts" of tongues and healing have ceased—that the end of the apostolic age brought about a cessation of the miracles associated with that age.⁶ My response is that there is no biblical data to support such a claim. I think Carson is right when he says:

(1) "At the exegetical level, the charismatic movement is surely right to argue that the *χαρίσματα* (*charismata*), including the more spectacular of them, have not been permanently withdrawn. Critics may rightly insist that in many (though certainly not all) charismatic circles, too much attention is devoted to too few gifts, and almost always the spectacular ones. But in my judgment there is no substantial exegetical or theological impediment to recognizing the continued existence of the gift of, say, tongues. Some of the gifts need to be carefully circumscribed so far as their authority status is concerned, and all need to be tested. Moreover, in a thoroughly mature church, it is doubtful that much attention would be focused on such matters. Nor is it necessary to argue that, say, the gift of tongues must be present in every church for that church to be complete: there is no warrant for that, either, and ample evidence that the Lord of the church dispenses and withdraws some of his gracious gifts at various times and for various purposes. But when all the caveats are in, there is no biblical warrant for ruling out all manifestations of contemporary tongues, on the ground that the gift was withdrawn in the subapostolic period."⁷

⁶ The technical term for this perspective is "cessationism." For a detailed presentation of this view, see Benjamin B. Warfield's book called *Counterfeit Miracles*.

⁷ Carson, p. 182.