

The Gift of Tongues

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The gift of tongues is perhaps the most controversial and misunderstood of all the gifts of the Spirit. The charismatics say that unless you speak in tongues, you have not been baptized in the Holy Spirit. Some go to the extreme of saying that unless you speak in tongues you are not even saved!

The conservative evangelicals say that those who speak in tongues are led by emotionalism or are being influenced by demons. With such extreme opinions, one might wonder if it would be better to leave the whole issue alone. That might be easier, but it would not be best. It is to the detriment of the church to disregard any of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, no matter how difficult the subject.

What is the gift of tongues? “Tongues” is a language given by the Holy Spirit, unknown to the speaker, by which the believer prays to God. Paul addressed this gift in 1 Corinthians 14:1-19. There was also an incident recorded in Scripture where tongues were used to preach the Gospel to unbelievers. In Acts 2, we read, **“And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance”** (verse 4). Those who had gathered were from a whole host of nations and were confounded as they heard the apostles speak in their own dialects, or languages. The word “speaking” in Acts 2:11 is translated from the Greek also as “preach” or “preaching.” The miracle was that these Galileans were proclaiming, in languages previously unknown to them, the great things God had done. Here we see a different operation of the gift of tongues: preaching. In 1 Corinthians 14, they were praying in languages previously unknown. Although there are times when the gift is manifested as on the Day of Pentecost, the more common manifestation seems to be for prayer.

As we discuss the gift of tongues, a few misconceptions need to be addressed. Are tongues for today? Many modern evangelicals say no, but they do so without any

biblical basis. Scripture does not teach anywhere that tongues, or any of the other gifts of the Spirit, will cease before Christ returns. Paul said, **“prophecies ... will fail; tongues ... will cease; knowledge ... will vanish away ... when that which is perfect has come”** (1 Corinthians 13:8, 10, *emphasis mine*). This means that the need for the gifts will come to an end when Jesus Christ returns to the earth, which has not happened yet.

Most of the Bible commentaries written before the end of the 19th Century interpreted “that which is perfect” as referring to the visible manifestation of the kingdom of God. It was only in the last century, and largely as a reaction to the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, that many evangelicals began to interpret “that which is perfect” as the completion of the New Testament canon. With this new interpretation came the idea that certain gifts ceased with the death of the last apostle. Those who hold this view are known as “cessationists.” Although they have put together a clever system of interpretation, they have completely failed to prove their position from a scriptural basis. Are tongues for today? If we take Scripture at face value, we have to conclude that they are.

If tongues are for today, does that mean every Christian is to speak in tongues? Not according to the apostle Paul, but many Pentecostals and charismatics will tell you otherwise. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions, including, **“Do all speak with tongues?”** (verse 30b). From the context, the understood answer is, “No.” But just as the cessationists have developed clever arguments to try to prove their view, so those from the Pentecostal and charismatic persuasion have tried to deny Paul’s assertion that not everyone will speak in tongues.

The Interpretation of Tongues

The gift of interpretation occurs when one person translates what another person has spoken in tongues. Paul states that tongues are not to be exercised during church services unless there is someone present with

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the gift of interpretation (1 Corinthians 14:28). Every time there is a public utterance in tongues, an interpretation should follow. According to the Scriptures, the one who is speaking in tongues is speaking to God and not to men, so the interpretation should be giving praise and glory to God (1 Corinthians 14:2).

The Holy Spirit has given the glorious gifts of tongues and their interpretation for the edification of the believer and the church. Paul clearly gives instruction in 1 Corinthians 14 on the purpose and proper use of these gifts. If people would follow the teaching of the Scriptures on these matters, most, if not all, of the confusion would be eliminated. ➔