

WHAT IS THE GIFT OF TONGUES?



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Introduction

Over nearly thirty years in American Christianity, there has been a division between believers over the issue of the spiritual gift of tongues. Unfortunately, much of the dialogue on the subject has been infested with emotional reactions to one view or another, and there has been an overall lack of careful historical scholarship and Biblical study reflected in many of the materials available on the issue. This article is offered in the interest of providing background for the understanding of the relevant Biblical texts, and to overview the definition of this gift.

The Definition of Tongues

In the New Testament, "tongues" means languages. This is an irrefutable fact of Bible study and linguistics, and it is of tremendous significance to some things which go on within Christianity.

The word *glossa* (γλῶσσα) occurs 50 times in the New Testament. It is used once to describe the appearance of the "tongues as of fire" in Acts 2:3. In that case it was a visual phenomenon which was described as something which looked like tongues of fire. The word is used more than a dozen times for the human tongue as an instrument of speech. In the remaining majority of its uses it is the equivalent of our English word "language(s)." What follows are seven evidences to support the thesis that the spiritual gift of tongues is ***the ability to speak in a foreign language that has not been learned by the one speaking.***

1. **The meaning of *glossa* (γλῶσσα).** The paragraph above summarizes the three ways it is used in the New Testament. W. E. Vine's *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* gives the definition as:

- a. "A language, coupled with 'tribe, people and nation' (seven times in Revelation)."
- b. "The supernatural gift of speaking in another language without its having been learned."¹

The Septuagint (The Greek translation of the Old Testament, from about 150 B.C.) uses the word approximately 160 times. The meaning is always confined to either the organ of speech and taste, or human language.

2. **The word is used interchangeably in Acts 2:6-8 with *dialektos* (διαλέκτος) "dialect"** to describe the spiritual gift. This could not possibly be true if the gift of tongues was not the speaking of known human languages.

3. **There is no evidence that there are two different kinds of gifts of tongues.** (This is significant because most who believe in a modern gift of tongues try to get around the previous

¹W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Vol. IV, p. 142.

two points by claiming that there is a "languages" gift of tongues and an "ecstatic speech" gift of tongues, both described in the New Testament. The evidence is that any **true** gift of tongues is known languages.) The book of Acts always uses *glossa* (γλῶσσα) in the plural ("languages") to describe this gift. This would be absurd if it was describing linguistic gibberish. "Gibberishes" is meaningless terminology.²

4. **Interpretation (the companion gift to tongues) means "translation."** The forms of the Greek word *hermeneuo* (in this case *diermeneuo* [διερμηνεύω]) mean "to explain, interpret or translate." Its most common use means to explain the meaning of words in a different language.³ There are other stronger forms of this word which include the idea of giving a full explanation similar to our English word "expound." Therefore, the spiritual gift of interpretation is the supernatural ability to translate an unlearned language. By its very definition, this gift (and therefore the gift of tongues) is verifiably miraculous.

5. **I Corinthians 12:10 and 12:28 mention "kinds" of languages.** The word translated "kind" is *genos* (γένος), from which we get the English "genus." It means a family or a group of things. This would also be irrelevant to the concept of gibberish, but a perfect description to languages.

6. I Corinthians 14:21, understood in Biblical context makes it clear that **tongues were foreign languages given as a sign to unbelieving Israel**—a sign that God was turning them over for judgment.⁴

7. **There is a contrast between the gift of tongues and ecstatic speech or babbling which was common to mystery religion activities in and around Corinth.** Ecstatic speech (unintelligible utterances) was (and is) Satan's counterfeit of the true spiritual gift of tongues. This is significant because **what is now being called the gift of tongues is not human languages**, and therefore seems to be the same counterfeit that was around when Paul wrote I Corinthians. William Samarin, professor of linguistics at University of Toronto studied the modern tongues phenomenon, and wrote the following:

²The King James translators followed an interesting pattern of adding in italics "unknown" before γλῶσσα (*glossa*, "tongue") whenever it is in the singular in I Corinthians 14. Their opinion was that Paul was referring to pagan counterfeit "gibberish" tongues when he wrote "tongue," and to the true gift when he wrote "tongues." Check it out for yourself in 14:2, 4, 13, 14, and 19.

³Vine, Vol. II, pp. 267-268.

⁴Paul links the gift of tongues to the fulfillment of a prophecy in Isaiah 28:11-12, predicting that judgment would come at the hands of foreigners. In its Old Testament fulfillment, it had to do with the Babylonian captivity. In the New Testament application of the principle, Paul seems to be saying that this miraculous gift was a similar sign that God was turning away from Israel for a time because of her rejection of Christ, just as He "turned away" from Israel in the time of the captivity because of her idolatry.

Over a period of five years I have taken part in meetings in Italy, Holland, Jamaica, Canada and the United States. I have observed old-fashioned Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals ["charismatics"]. I have been in small meetings in private homes as well as in mammoth public meetings. I have seen such different cultural settings as are found among Puerto Ricans of the Bronx, the snake handlers of the Appalachians and the Russian Molakans of Los Angeles. . . . I have interviewed tongues speakers, and tape recorded and analyzed countless samples of tongues. In every case, glossolalia turns out to be linguistic nonsense. In spite of superficial similarities, glossolalia is fundamentally not language.⁵

When Paul wrote "*If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels*" he was making a hypothetical statement. The sense is "even if I could speak . . ." He was attacking a problem of many in Corinth who had a fixation on the gift of tongues, and he was about to "unload on them" for misplacing their priorities on that "showy" gift rather than on practicing real love for others. He does not say what "the tongues of angels" really is, and this is a point of debate used to advantage by those who want to justify charismatic practices. There are two New Testament passages which are sometimes used to try to explain this ambiguous phrase:

II Corinthians 12:3-4: And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise, and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.

Revelation 14:2-3: And I heard a voice from heaven, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder, and the voice which I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps. And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders; and no one could learn the song except the one hundred and forty-four thousand who had been purchased from the earth.

Whatever speech is described in those two passages, **it cannot be uttered on earth.** Paul apparently meant that **even if** it was possible to speak in the "languages of angels" there is a far more important consideration—love.

These passages are used by many people to justify the idea of a version of the gift of tongues which is a "prayer language." That idea is completely foreign to both passages. Even more significant is the fact that the only time Paul mentions praying in tongues (which must mean praying in a foreign language) is in I Corinthians 14:14-17, where he says **not to do it!**

The other passage used to justify the concept of a "prayer language" is Romans 8:26:

And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words;

⁵*Tongues Of Men And Angels*, MacMillan and Company, 1972

In this passage the case is even weaker. It describes something done only by the Holy Spirit (not by humans), and it specifically says it is something outside the realm of human vocal expression. *If it is a sound made by a person, it has nothing to do with Romans 8:26!*

Tongues Have Ceased

The evidence of the Bible and church history point strongly to the conclusion that the gift of tongues has ceased operating. If that's true, it obviously applies as well to the gift of interpretation of tongues.

I Corinthians 13:8 proclaims something about the gift of tongues which distinguishes it from every other spiritual gift. It says that **tongues will cease**. The word for "cease" is *pauro* (παύω), which by its meaning and the form of the word in that verse has the clear meaning [tongues] *will cease by themselves*. We can capture the meaning of the term by saying "tongues will peter out on their own."

Other gifts which held the fascination of the Christians in Corinth "will be done away" in the eternal state, but tongues are different, and this is said *only* of the gift of tongues. In light of that, and obvious question is *when?* Scripture and history beyond Scripture answer the question.

The final mention of tongues in the book of Acts is in 19:6. Though apostolic ministry continued, tongues vanish from the record. That fact alone tells us that tongues never were inextricably connected to salvation.

The final mention of the gift of tongues in the Bible is the several references to it in I Corinthians 14, about a dozen years before the close of the book of Acts. Thus, the Bible itself suggests that tongues ceased within the era of the apostles.

I Corinthians 14:21-22 cites Isaiah 28:11-12 to make the point that the presence of the gift of tongues was a sign of God's judgment on Israel. This was a "sign gift" which was intended to show Israel that God was chastening and turning away from the nation because of their unbelief in their Messiah. That passage explains, therefore, that the primary purpose of tongues was "for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers" (14:21).

There is no evidence whatsoever of the gift of tongues operating in church history after the era of the apostles. Certain phenomena have been *called* the gift of tongues, but those phenomena do not fit what the Bible defines as this gift.

At best, the modern so-called gift of tongues is harmless. A study of I Corinthians 13 and 14 makes it easy to see that the modern uses of "tongues" are not related to the original purpose of the gift. They can be harmless in the sense that they do not necessarily interfere with other ministries of spiritual gifts.

Modern Charismatic Tongues

In light of this material, how do we account for the phenomenon which charismatic Christians call “speaking in tongues” or “praying in tongues?” We do not deny the reality and sincerity of their faith, nor the reality of the experiences they call “tongues.” But what they call “tongues” appears to be a phenomenon known as “ecstatic speech” and not the biblical spiritual gift of tongues. It simply does not fit the data of the New Testament on the gift of tongues. There is no evidence that the gift of tongues continues to operate today.

At worst, however, modern “tongues” can be harmful, for several reasons:

1. **Most tongues-speaking today goes hand-in-hand with “experiential theology.”** That is the error of proclaiming something is true based primarily upon an experience someone has had rather than solely upon the basis of careful exegesis of the word of God. Experiential theology is a contradiction to the time-tested principle which grew out of the Protestant Reformation, *sola scriptura*, which means that Scripture is the sole arbiter of truth.
2. **It can divert attention away from the word of God** by causing people to do introspection based upon their experience (or lack of it) with tongues as a barometer of their spiritual growth or health.
3. **It has proven over and over to be a divisive issue in the body of Christ** because it leads to defining spirituality in such a way that some Christians are made to feel inferior to others (and vice-versa). The very presence of terminology such as “full gospel” to label some charismatic groups implies that other Christians believe or practice something less—a clear violation of I Corinthians 12:14-31.
4. **It often (though not always) goes hand-in-hand with the false doctrine which says you don’t have the Holy Spirit unless you speak in tongues.** That teaching contradicts Romans 8:9 and I Corinthians 12:13.

Conclusion

Some well-meaning Christians feel that any discussion of tongues is divisive or counter-productive, especially if it is critical of the modern movement. But the fact is that it’s our duty to understand the Scriptures carefully, and it is crucial for us to evaluate every experience by the Scriptures. And if an experience is promoted as necessary for spiritual health, it’s crucial that we consider it very carefully.

There is a broad spectrum of beliefs among Christians who believe in speaking in tongues, so generalizations are difficult. But in the cases of some groups, the beliefs about tongues are such that a response is necessary. For example, the constitution of a major denomination⁶ says “*The baptism of believers in the Holy Ghost is witnessed by the initial physical sign of speaking with other tongues as the Spirit of God gives them utterance.*” The

⁶Assemblies of God.

Declaration of Faith of another group⁷ says: *“We believe in speaking with other tongues as the spirit gives utterance, and that it is the initial evidence of the Holy Ghost.”*

While those statements are believed by thousands of Christians, they contradict the Bible. According to I Corinthians 12:13, every believer has the Holy Spirit and has received Spirit baptism, but in the same chapter (12:30), Paul makes it clear that **not** every Christian—even in the first century—spoke in tongues. So it’s crucial that we approach this issue carefully and accurately according to the Scriptures.

Four observations of the gift of tongues in the Bible help to put the matter in proper perspective.

1. The gift of tongues is mentioned twenty-two times in I Corinthians, but it is never mentioned to any other church in any other New Testament epistle, nor is it mentioned in II Corinthians. (Apparently the problems concerning tongues were solved by I Corinthians.)
2. The other references to the gift of tongues are confined to four places in the New Testament: One statement in Mark 16:17⁸ predicting that this sign was soon to come, and three occurrences of tongues-speaking (Acts 2, 10 and 19) in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies and the prediction of Mark 16:17.
3. Speaking in tongues is never mentioned in any place in the New Testament epistles as the normal sign of receiving the Holy Spirit. The fact that it happened three times in the history of the early church (in fulfillment of prophecy) does not mean it is the normal state of affairs. It is erroneous to take a historical event and claim that what happened in history is what should happen for every believer. If that were true, every believer who lies would be struck dead in front of the church, because that’s what happened in history with Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11).
4. The Bible says that tongues will cease (I Corinthians 13:8). Since this gift vanishes from the Bible record during lives of the apostles, and does not reappear in church history, the conclusion is that the prediction of I Corinthians 13:8 is fulfilled. The burden of proof is upon advocates of speaking in tongues to show that they speak in known languages (unknown to the speaker) and there is always an interpretation. Obviously an interpretation of a known language is verifiable by anyone who speaks the language.

Finally, we must remind ourselves that truth is never determined by experience. The “Truth By Experience Syndrome” is the belief that something is true, and you just know it

⁷The Church of God denomination.

⁸The textual evidence for the section of Mark including 16:17 is disputable. But the issue of the validity of speaking in tongues does not depend on whether that text is valid. For sake of this discussion, we accept Mark 16:17 as a legitimate portion of the inspired text.

because you had a profound experience. It is a syndrome which flings open that door of the human heart to all sorts of deception.

Truth is not determined by our experiences. Our experiences must be scrutinized by the truth of the Scriptures. There is no doubt that many Christians experience a phenomenon which they sincerely believe is the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues. But the truth of the Scriptures do not substantiate their claim.

The greatest evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit in a person's life is the evidence of the fruit of the Spirit, described in Galatians 5:22-23: *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self_control; against such things there is no law.* The evidences that a person is filled with (controlled by) the Holy Spirit are singing praises to God, giving thanks for all things, and being subject to one another (Ephesians 5:19-20).