

What About Tongues?



Its Purpose and Function in the Church

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We have no desire to be divisive nor dogmatic in the area of tongues. The long standing controversy of tongues, its purpose, and function in the church will not be solved by us. However, we do want to present what we believe to be a balanced biblical view. It is our hope that there can be unity even in the midst of debate and biblical interpretation.

The Apostle Paul writing to the Corinthian church

Paul wants there to be a clear understanding of what the gifts are (1 Cor. 12). He is also concerned about pure motivation (1 Cor. 13), the proper use of tongues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit within the local assembly (1 Cor. 14).

1 Corinthians 12:1 Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant.

1 Corinthians 14:1 Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.

Scripture, church, and secular history all record that the gifts of the Holy Spirit have been wrongly used in both personal and public use. While there is evidence of abuse of all the gifts, the greatest misunderstanding lies in the biblical use of tongues.

Tongues for personal edification

“Speaking in a tongue is a supernatural manifestation of the Holy Spirit whereby the Christian speaks in a language he has never learned but which expresses his innermost thoughts and feelings, a language which God hears and understands. . .Praying in tongues becomes a means of personal edification through communication of one’s spirit with God in praise and prayer. This is an act of spiritual worship not controlled or limited by one’s intellect. It was practiced in great measure by Paul himself and he wanted his readers to be speaking in this way.”

—*Laymen’s Comm. On The Holy Spirit*

1 Corinthians 14:2 (KJV) For he that speaketh in an *unknown* tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth *him*; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries.

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1 Corinthians 14:4 He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.

1 Corinthians 14:14-15 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. ¹⁵So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind.

1 Corinthians 14:18 I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.

Ephesians. 6:18a And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayer and requests. . .

Jude 1:20 But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit.

Tongues and the congregational or public meeting

While Paul encourages every Christian to speak in tongues on a regular basis, when it comes to a public assembly personal liberty must yield so that others may be edified. The “Golden Rule” that governs proper use of spiritual gifts in a public assembly is found in 1 Corinthians 14:26.

1 Corinthians 14:26 (KJV) How is it then, brethen? When ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying. (Greek-distomos, to build up, to promote spiritual growth)

1 Corinthians 14:16-17 (NIV) If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say “Amen” to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? ¹⁷You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.

1 Corinthians 14:23 So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?

“Love will never be satisfied unless someone else is sharing in the edification. . . Love will never edify itself at the expense of stumbling others. . . A great many abuses of spiritual gifts spring from mere selfishness, and this applies especially to the gift of tongues. In the public and assembly meetings the one who has the gift must always remember, with a practical love, the presence of other people; and must always have an eye to the effect, helpful or otherwise, which the exercise of his gift will have upon them. He cannot act the same as when alone with God.”

—*Concerning Spiritual Gifts, Donald Gee*

The gift of tongues as a message to the congregation

“Whereas Paul wanted all to speak in tongues devotionally, not all speak with tongues to the congregation of the church (1 Cor. 12:30). Usually in this function, Christ is speaking by His Spirit to the assembled people. In order for the message from God in an unknown tongue to edify the church, the gift of tongues must operate with the sister-gift of interpretation. The one who interprets may be the one who has spoken in the tongue (vv5,13), or it may be another person (vv.27,28). The interpretation is not necessarily an exact translation of the utterance in tongues, but may be a rendering in the vernacular of the main content of the message in the unknown language.”

—*Christenson, Speaking in Tongues, p. 116*

“The response in English may be longer, because the interpretation itself may have been followed

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by a word of prophecy. Or it may be that the speaking in tongues was actually a prayer, and the presumed interpretation an answer by prophecy. “ —Bennett, *The Holy Spirit and You*, p. 89

Tongues-utterance plus the interpretation may edify the church equally as much as interpretation (v5b), lending a distinct note of the supernatural to the meeting.

1 Corinthians 14:5 I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.

1 Corinthians 14:27-28 If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. ²⁸If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God.

The obvious question that arises, Can I speak in tongues while in a public assembly if I am not giving a message in tongues? Yes, before the service in the privacy of the prayer room, or quietly to yourself during the service. Remember the “Golden Rule” – when in public seek to edify the other person by speaking in a language that they can understand!

Tongues as a sign to the unbeliever

1 Corinthians 14:22 Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers.

This “sign” may be greatly enhanced if there is an unbeliever present that understands the message in tongues and then hears the interpretation by someone that has no natural understanding of the language that was spoken. Indeed, this is a powerful witness!

Acts 2:1-12 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place (a private gathering, not public). ²Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. ⁵Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. ⁷Utterly amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹(both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” ¹²Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” (emphasis added)

As the people in the streets began to hear God being glorified in their native language they were amazed! The 120 disciples of Jesus were speaking by the Spirit in languages they had never learned. They were all privately edified and filled with joy at receiving the promised baptism of the Holy Spirit. Even in this initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Peter knew that there needed to be an explanation to those that had heard that they might understand what God had done. It seems evident that as Peter stood to address the crowd, that all were quiet and ready to listen, including the 120.

Acts 2:14, 37 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and

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all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. 37
When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles,
“Brothers, what shall we do?” (emphasis added)

September 26, 1965 the Holy Spirit sovereignty came on the believers in the Presbyterian church in the town of Soe on Timor Island in Indonesia. An illiterate woman knowing only the Timorese language was heard to be worshipping Jesus Christ in perfect English, and an uneducated man of Soe was magnifying God in German. There have been numerous incidents similar to this in America and other countries as well. There are reported cases where a message in tongues has been given directly to a person of foreign birth in his or her own tongue. The result is often that the heart of the hearer is convinced and melted, and he receives Christ as his Savior and Lord.

While there are many differences of opinion, we seek to deal with these issues according to the measure of understanding that God has granted us thus far. Of one thing you can be sure, to set aside the testimony of the Bible for even the most plausible theories of life experience, is bound to end in loss and confusion. There is no bondage in obedience to scripture and there is no real liberty in casting it aside!