

## A BRIEF BIBLICAL SURVEY OF SPEAKING IN TONGUES

### **What is “speaking in tongues”?**

The Greek word used for “tongues” is *glossa*, meaning “tongue or language.” It is used fifty times in the NT. Fifteen times it refers to a person’s physical tongue. Thirty-five times it refers to the speaking of languages (e.g., Revelation 5:9, 7:9, 10:11, 13:7, 14:6, 17:15). In Acts 2:4-8, it is used in conjunction with the Greek word, *dialektos* (from which we get our English word “dialect”), which clearly indicates that the original gift of tongues given at Pentecost was the gift of speaking in known human languages. However, in 1 Corinthians 13:1, the concept of speaking in the “language of angels” is mentioned which could indicate that some tongue-speaking was viewed as a heavenly language, or a “new language” (Mark 16:17), unknown to men.

Typically, when people refer to “speaking in tongues” today, they are referring to what they believe to be a supernatural gift from the Holy Spirit in which a person begins speaking in a language that may be known or unknown from a human linguistic standpoint.

### **Where is speaking in tongues mentioned in the Bible?**

The gift of tongues is mentioned in Mark 16:17 (a disputed passage), Acts, and 1 Corinthians 12-14. It is found in no other epistle of Paul nor is it emphasized anywhere else in Scripture.

### **Who is given the gift of tongues?**

In the book of Acts, the gift of tongues first appears at Pentecost when the apostles, and possibly the early believers with them, began to speak in the languages of those gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks (Acts 2:1-13). The gift of tongues is also given to the first Gentile converts in Acts 10:44-48 and is implied, though not mentioned, with the first Samaritan converts in Acts 8:14-17. It is also given to the disciples of John the Baptist in Acts 19:1-7.

In 1 Corinthians 12-14, Paul makes it clear that the gift of tongues is one of many gifts of the Spirit and that it is not given to every believer (12:7-10, 27-30).

### **Why is the gift of tongues given?**

In Acts, the gift of tongues points to a major historical transition in the work of the Holy Spirit. In the OT, the Spirit was not poured out on every individual. In the NT, the Spirit will be given to all those who believe in the name of Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 2:17). God used the manifestation of speaking in tongues to unify the early church and to demonstrate that Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles all receive salvation in the same way. There are no distinctions with God (10:34-35). This was a major paradigm shift in the mind of the early disciples who assumed that a person would have to become a Jew first before becoming a follower of Jesus Christ. It was the giving of the gift of tongues that convinced Peter and the apostles that Jews and Gentiles are all saved in the same way with no further requirements of following the Jewish law (Acts 15:5-11).

The gift of tongues as a public manifestation of the initial coming of the Spirit was not needed after the early church was established and the wall between Jews and Gentiles was effectively broken down. However, according to 1 Corinthians 12-14, the gift of tongues still existed in the early church as one of the gifts of the Spirit to be apparently used in a person’s private prayer life and, on limited occasions, to others in the church, but only if it was able to be interpreted.

## **How are we to view the gift of tongues today?**

Acts is a historical book. It *describes* what happened in the early church; it does not necessarily *prescribe* what is normative today. It is the rest of the NT that helps us know how to live as the body of Christ in the age of grace. It is significant that the gift of tongues is not mentioned in any other epistle except 1 Corinthians where Paul is correcting its misuse. Apparently the Corinthians had elevated the experience of speaking in tongues to the highest level, making it the primary evidence of the Spirit and the test of spiritual maturity. Paul strongly contradicted this view.

The following is a summary of the principles that Paul teaches regarding speaking in tongues in 1 Corinthians 12-14:

1. Tongues are just one of many spiritual gifts (12:7-10).
2. The work of the Spirit is manifest in many different gifts, not just one (12:7-10).
3. Every believer in Jesus Christ is baptized and indwelt by the Holy Spirit (12:13).
4. The gift of tongues is not given to all believers (12:29-30, 14:5).
5. Believers are to pursue love more than any particular spiritual gift (12:31, 13:1-13).
6. Love is the ultimate measure of the work of the Spirit and any spiritual gift (13:1-13).
7. Tongues are temporary in nature and will “cease” on their own at some point (13:8). Paul uses a different verb with prophecies and knowledge which may indicate that while these gifts are brought to a sudden end in the future, tongues will simply fade away over time.
8. Tongues are a way of speaking to God (14:2, 28). Thus, by implication, they are to be primarily used in one’s personal prayer life, if one were to have the gift.
9. Tongues edify the individual not the whole church (14:4).
10. Tongues that are not interpreted are unfruitful (14:13-15).
11. Tongues are not to be separated from the use of one’s mind and understanding (14:15).
12. Tongues are not particularly useful or helpful in the public church setting (14:18-19).
13. An emphasis on tongues is a sign of immaturity not maturity (14:20).
14. Tongues are a sign of judgment to unbelievers rather than a sign of maturity for believers (14:20-22). Paul quotes an OT prophecy (Isaiah 28:11-12) which warns the nation of Israel that they would know they are under judgment when they hear people speaking in unknown languages. Thus, in Acts, the gift of tongues was a sign that God was no longer working through the nation of Israel (because of their unbelief) but through the church.
15. Tongues in the church can make outsiders think that believers are insane (14:23).
16. If tongues are used in the church, there is to be a maximum of three people speaking, one at a time, with an interpretation given for each in an orderly fashion. If no interpreter is present, then the person is to remain silent (14:27-29, 33).
17. Tongues are not uncontrollable (14:28, 32).
18. Tongues are not to be forbidden (14:39).

Thus, though there is biblical and historical evidence that the gift of tongues served its purpose and faded away, the possibility is open that God could sovereignly choose to use this gift in some way in the present, but only if it is used in line with His Word, in private prayer, in an orderly, restricted fashion in a public worship setting (with interpretation), or in some kind of missionary setting. However, an emphasis on tongues as a sign of spiritual maturity and/or “fullness of the Spirit” is divisive, distracting, and unbiblical. The NT teaches that the Spirit’s filling is not evidenced in speaking in tongues but in the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) and in a joyful heart, a praiseful mouth, a thankful attitude, and submissive actions toward others (Eph. 5:18-21).