

Tongues and Interpretation of Tongues

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The gift of tongues came at Pentecost (Acts 2:3), during the revival at Cornelius' house (Acts 10:46) and also at Ephesus (Acts 19:6). It is discussed at length in 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14 and it would be a good idea to read those chapters in addition to this study.

Tongues is also a fulfillment of a prophecy by Isaiah that indicates judgment on Israel, who despite the clearly supernatural nature of tongues, will not believe (Isaiah 28:11,12; Mark 16: 17-18 and 1 Corinthians 14:21).

There seems to be two sides to the gift:

a) The tongue itself which may be a tongue of men or of angels (1 Corinthians 13:1) and b) the interpretation of that tongue, which is not a natural gift but a gift of the Spirit that can be prayed for (1 Corinthians 14:13) - you don't learn Spanish by just praying for it.

When the gift of tongues operates alone it edifies only that person (1 Corinthians 14:4) in their spirit but not in their mind (1 Corinthians 14:14). But when interpreted it can become a revelation gift and edify the whole church (1 Corinthians 14:5, 12, 13,26,27).

Paul's main point in 1 Corinthians 12-14 is that the gift of tongues is not to be used merely as a semi-pagan ecstatic experience but rather as a gift that can edify the Church. It is to be used in love (1 Corinthians 13). If tongues is not used in love it is a mere 'noisy gong or clanging cymbal' (1 Corinthians 13:1). Part of using the gift of tongues in love is to use it as a 'team player' in the body of Christ, combining it with the other gifts as God directs (1 Corinthians 12:14-30). This means using the gift of tongues in an orderly fashion in the congregational meeting with a strong emphasis on making sure that it is always interpreted in such a setting (1 Corinthians 14:5, 26-28).

Apparently the spiritual gifts are distributed so that we each have a function in the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:7-11). Not all speak in tongues and not all can interpret the gift of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:30). If there is no one present who can interpret then the person should be quiet in the meeting and simply speak to himself and to God (1 Corinthians 14:26-28). Paul seems to place no restrictions on using the gift of tongues on your own or in a small group setting. In fact he says that he 'speaks in tongues more than you all' (1 Corinthians 14:18) and that tongues was not to be forbidden (14:39).

Thus the problem in Corinth was not tongues itself, which is good, and is a spiritual gift from God; but rather how that gift was being used in a disorderly and confusing way in the church meeting; so that time was being taken up with extensive uninterpreted tongue-speaking and no one was getting any wiser in God as a result.

There are three main benefits to tongues. Firstly tongues edifies the individual Christian in their spirit (1 Corinthians 14:4,14) and is associated with major spiritual events such as being baptized in the Spirit (Acts 2:1-3).

Secondly tongues when interpreted becomes a revelation gift similar to prophecy and can edify the whole church (1 Corinthians 14:5)

Thirdly it is a 'sign for unbelievers' (as it was on the day of Pentecost) that clearly indicates that saving and refreshing supernatural activity is taking place:

Isaiah 28:11-12 MKJV *for with stammering lips and another tongue He will speak to this people. (12) To whom He said, This is the rest; cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing. Yet they were not willing to hear.*

Mark 16:17-18 KJV *And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; (18) They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.*

1 Corinthians 14:21-22 KJV *(21) In the law it is written, With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord. (22) Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying serveth not for them that believe not, but for them which believe.*

So we see that tongues is for a) personal edification and impartation b) revelation to the congregation when interpreted and c) a sign of God's presence and action for unbelievers.

The gift of tongues is our personal prayer language with God and a means whereby we can be strengthened in the inner man and receive revelation from God. Those who speak in tongues should pray that they may interpret so their minds can be fruitful as well as their spirit. While tongues is a minor gift and it comes last on the lists of gifts it is not to be forbidden, discarded or despised. It has a place in our prayer life and in helping us to communicate with God.

If you pray in tongues it can be helpful to sit down with a spiritual journal and to record the impressions that you receive from God while praying in tongues. These may be cries of praise and worship, revelations about the glory of God and the excellencies of Christ or groans of intercession and travail for the Church and the work of the Lord. Do not criticize or evaluate such impressions at first (that can wait until afterward) just jot them down as they come to you. Also do not act on them or share them until you have tested and confirmed them against the Word of

God and given them time to mature within your spirit. Bring startling words and bold courses of action before other mature Spirit-filled Christians to see if they also feel a witness of the Spirit.

God intended tongues to be a spiritual blessing to His Church and yet it has been an incredible source of controversy in recent years. Let those who speak in tongues, speak in tongues, but in an orderly fashion, so that we can all be blessed by their gift.

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