DOCTRINE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Gift of Tongues

Lesson 17

The gift of tongues has been a hotly debated issue for the last one hundred years. Ever since Miss Agnes Ozman promoted ecstatic speech in the church the phenomena has spread around the globe. To make things worse, the Bible uses the word "tongues" in multiple ways. Others have read into the Scriptures definitions of tongues which do not exist. Thus the confusion. We are faced with many important questions. What is the proper use, purpose, modern application, and historical significance of the gift of tongues? Should we be speaking in tongues today? Is there an angelic language of tongues? Should I pray in tongues? Has tongues been done away with since the first century? If tongues is done away with, what is going on in so-called "tongues speaking churches?" In this lesson we will seek to answer these questions and survey what the Bible says about tongues, attempting to untie many of the knots concerning this specific sign gift.

I. DEFINITION OF THE GIFT OF TONGUES

A. *Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* says that the gift of tongues is: "The supernatural gift of speaking in another language without its having been learnt; in Acts 2:4-13 the circumstances are recorded from the viewpoint of the hearers; to those in whose language the utterances were made it appeared as a supernatural phenomenon."[1]

B. *The New Bible Dictionary:* "When the assembled disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost they began 'to speak in other tongues *(lalein heterais glōsais*), as the Spirit gave them utterance' (Acts 2:4), so that many Jews of the Dispersion were astonished to hear the praises of God in their own native languages (*glōsa*, v. 11; *dialektos*, vv. 6, 8)."[2]

C. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary:* "What Paul meant by speaking **in a tongue** is a matter of considerable debate. One common view is to see Paul's use of the word "tongue" (glōssa) against the background of first-century pagan religions and thus define it as ecstatic speech similar to that expressed by the sibylla, or female prophetesses. The Cumaen sibyl was the most famous of the 10 female prophetesses claimed by various regions. Others see the tongues-speaking in 1 Corinthians as ecstatic speech similar to that of Pythia, the female oracle at Delphi or similar to the maenads of Dionysus in their ecstatic frenzy."[3]

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[1] W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words,* Logos Bible Software.

[2] D. R. W. Wood, *New Bible Dictionary* (InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1195.

[3] John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary,* Logos Bible Software, I Cor. 14:2.

D. *The Moody Handbook of Theology:* "A number of observations help to clarify the meaning of this gift."

1. The book of Acts establishes that biblical tongues were languages (Acts 2:6, 8, 11). When the foreign Jews visited Jerusalem at Pentecost they heard the apostles proclaim the gospel in their native languages (cf. vv. 8–11).

2. Tongues of Acts and Corinthians were the same. There is no evidence that the tongues of Corinthians were different from the ones in Acts or that they were angelic languages (1 Cor. 13:1).

3. Tongues were a lesser gift (1 Cor. 12:28). The foundational gifts that were given for the building up of the church were apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor-teacher, and teacher (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11). Tongues were mentioned last to indicate they were not a primary or foundational gift (1 Cor. 12:28).

4. Tongues were a temporary sign gift (1 Cor. 13:8). The phrase "they will cease" is in the middle voice, emphasizing "they will stop themselves." The implication is that tongues would not continue until "the perfect comes" the time when knowledge and prophecy gifts would be terminated—but would cease of their own accord when their usefulness terminated. If tongues were to continue until "the perfect comes" the verb would likely be passive in form.[4]

E. Several kinds of "tongues" are mentioned in the Bible.

1. Tongues may refer to the physical tongue (e.g., **Judg. 7:5; Psa. 22:15**).

2. Tongues can refer to languages in general (e.g., **Isa. 28:11; 33:19**).

3. Tongues can be a sign gift that enables someone to speak in a known language that is unknown to them (e.g., **Acts 2:1-13; I Cor. 14:6-12**).

4. Speaking in "a tongue" can refer to pagan ecstatic speech. In **I Cor. 14** Paul contrasts mindless, non-edifying ecstatic speech (a tongue) with the biblical gift of (tongues), because the Corinthians had merged the pagan counterfeit of ecstatic speech with the Biblical gift of tongues.

5. Added to the biblical definitions above are two other categories that some arrive at by twisting the Scriptures and ignoring the context of certain passages, i.e., "speaking with the tongues of angels" (**I Cor. 13:1**) and "praying in tongues" (**I Cor. 14:14**).

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[4]Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1997), 273.

II. THOUGHTS TO PONDER ABOUT THE GIFT OF TONGUES

A. *The Holy Spirit:* "The three instances in Acts constitute the only Scriptural reference to tongues in the New Testament except for the account in I Corinthians (12:10, 28, 30; 14:1-40). The passages in Acts do not explain the gift of tongues nor is there any evidence in Acts that the act of speaking in tongues was ever repeated by those who had part in these three instances. Outside of 1 Corinthians there is no exposition of the doctrine in any of the Epistles. Accordingly, it is the problem of the doctrine of tongues to examine the instances in Acts for clues as to the nature of the gift, and to determine its regulation and extent from the 1 Corinthian passages."[5]

B. *The Moody Handbook of Theology:* "Tongues were a part of the miraculous era of Christ and the apostles and were necessary, along with the gift of miracles, as an authenticating sign of the apostles (2 Cor. 12:12). With the completion of the Scriptures there was no longer any need for an authenticating sign; the Bible was now the authority in verifying the message that God's servants proclaimed. Tongues were a sign gift belonging to the infancy stage of the church (1 Cor. 13:10–11; 14:20)."[6]

C. In **I Cor. 13:8** Paul makes an interesting statement. He says, "*Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away*." This passage is interesting in that there are three things mentioned that will come to an end. Prophecy and knowledge, Paul says, will be abolished or rendered inoperative. The future passive tense is used which tells us that those gifts will come to an end by the influence of something else. Tongues, on the other hand, is described as ceasing, and a future middle tense is used which means that tongues will cease of their own accord.

When will this happen? The following context indicates in **vs. 10** that "*when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away with*." Whether this refers to prophecy only, which is mentioned in **vs. 9,** or prophecy and knowledge mentioned in **vs. 8,** it is difficult to say, but it seems unlikely that it refers to tongues because the phrase "done away," used in **vs. 8** is referring to prophecy and knowledge and is also used in **vs. 10** in relation to the "partial" being done away. In **vs. 8,** tongues is not said to be "done away" with but ceasing on its own. Much has been written on this but I believe that tongues was a temporary sign gift for the early church. Few people had it, and those who did have it used it for evangelistic purposes. After the New Testament was written, it ceased. Church history verifies this.

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[5]John Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit,* pgs. 181-182.

[6]Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1997), 273.

D. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament:* "Ecstatic phenomena are found early in the Greek world, as is shown by the Dionysus cult and the related but contrasting cult of Apollo. Dionysus is a union of both the hidden god and the manifested god who shares with his worshipers in a combination of creative desire and destructive frenzy. Wine and dancing and Bacchic cries express this, but also become a means to induce it. The dancing women show vividly how the world is bewitched for ecstatics. Since ecstasy brings vision, a prophetic element is involved which is most clearly reflected in the Delphic cult. A more masculine version may be seen in the Roman Bacchanalian rite in which men engage in prophecy accompanied by wild convulsions. Similar ecstasies occur in the Attis and Isis cults. We also find individual ecstatics both male and female (Bacchants and Sibyls). Ecstasy soon secures a firm place in philosophy. Thus Plato borrows from mystical ecstasy in his description of poetic inspiration. . . In Mithraism various ideas are present, e.g., rapture and vision in the body when it is divested of the weight of earth; God's power as our true being or as inbreathed spirit. Philo seems to be the first to use ecstasy in a technical sense. He views rational and mystical-ecstatic knowledge as complementary, but stresses the latter, which carries with it the dawning of divine light. The ecstatic theology of revelation reaches a climax in Neo-Platonism, for which the ecstatic is an organ of deity.[7]

III. SCRIPTURAL PROOF OF THE GIFT OF TONGUES

A. Historical Examples of Tongues:

1. The first recorded experience of the gift of tongues was at Pentecost, the birth of the church. It was a sign gift given to authenticate the Apostle's teaching and to evangelize the lost with the gospel.

   Acts 2:3-11, "And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. 5 Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. 6 And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language. 7 They were amazed and astonished, saying, "Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 "And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? 9 "Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God."

[7] Gerhard Kittle, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* Logos Bible Software, under "ecstasy."

2. Next the Samaritans were given the gift of tongues so that both Jews and Samaritans would know that both were one in Christ's body, the Church.

   Acts 8:14-19, "Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, 15 who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. 16 For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. 18 Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, 19 saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

3. Next the gift of tongues was given to Gentiles, so that Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles would all know they were one in Christ's body the Church.

   Acts 10:44-46 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. 45 All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. 46 For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered,

   Acts 11:15 "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning.

4. Finally, an instance is recorded when disciples of John the Baptist received the gift of tongues as verification of their inclusion into the body of Christ and to let them know they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

   Acts 19:6 And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking with tongues and prophesying.

B. **Erroneous Examples of tongues:** While some have built a case for tongues being normal for all times and places, the biblical evidence and church history argue otherwise. The Apostles received the gift of tongues in **Acts 2,** later the Samaritans in **Acts 8,** after that the Gentiles in **Acts 10-11,** and finally John's disciples in **Acts 19.** There are no other recorded instances of tongues outside of **Acts.** The manifestation of tongues was apparently rare. When listed with other spiritual gifts, it always appears at the end of the list. While some today claim to have the gift of tongues, it isn't the biblical gift of tongues, but ecstatic speech. Jesus told His Apostles in **Acts 1:8**, "*but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea* [primarily Jewish areas] *and Samaria* [where the Samaritans were], *and even to the remotest part of the earth* [Where the Gentiles were]." The manifestation of the gift of tongues follows the pattern of **Acts 1:8.**

C. **I Cor. 14** is the most significant text concerning the God honoring practice of the biblical gift of tongues. Paul contrasts the biblical gift of tongues with pagan ecstatic speech all the way through the chapter. The Corinthians had merged the pagan practice of ecstatic speech with the biblical gift and therefore Paul writes to sort out the mess. The two charts below will help you see the stark contrast between ecstatic speech, which is practiced in so-called "tongues speaking churches" today and the legitimate biblical gift of tongues which operated in the first century.

Text	Biblical Gift of Tongues	Text	Pagan Ecstatic Speech
Acts 2:6; I Cor. 14:10	Tongues is the ability to speak the gospel to unbelievers in a language unknown to oneself.	**I Cor. 14:9, 11**	Ecstatic speech is not a language but gibberish spoken into the air and makes others see you as a barbarian.
I Cor. 12:7; 14:6, 12, 26	Tongues is for edification of others.	**I Cor. 14:4**	Ecstatic speech is for the edification of self.
I Cor. 13:1	Tongues is practiced out of love for others.	**I Cor. 14:4**	Ecstatic speech is practiced out of love for self.
I Cor. 13:8	Tongues is designed to pass away after a time.		Ecstatic speech continues today.
I Cor. 14:5, 13, 28	Tongues are always interpreted so that others are edified and if there is no interpreter, the gift of tongues is not employed even if one has the gift.	**I Cor. 14:23**	Ecstatic speech can't be interpreted because it is not a language and therefore no one is edified. Ecstatic speech is uttered even though it can't be interpreted.
I Cor. 14:22	Tongues is to be used as a sign for evangelization of the lost.		Ecstatic speech is practiced to heighten religious feeling, impress others, and even deceive.
I Cor. 14:27	No more than three people are allowed to speak in tongues during a worship service.		Often many speak in ecstatic speech simultaneously during a worship service.
I Cor. 14:33-34	Women are never allowed to speak in tongues in public worship services.		Women regularly utter ecstatic speech in public worship.
I Cor. 14:33, 40	Practiced in an orderly manner for the edification of believers and the evangelization of unbelievers.		Often practiced in an emotional frenzy promoting chaos and disorder.
Acts 2:5-41	The person exercising the gift knows what they are saying and their mind is fruitful.	**I Cor. 14:2, 14**	The person practicing ecstatic speech does not know what they are saying and their mind is not fruitful.
	From God the Holy Spirit		From self or Satan

Focus of section	Plural or Singular	Information about tongues	Verse/s
Its relationship to other gifts vss. 1-19 **Special Note:** The key to understanding I Cor. 14 is to observe the singular and plural usages of the word "tongue." The singular is used to identify "ecstatic speech" in almost every case. Ecstatic speech is not a known language, is not an expression of the Holy Spirit, and doesn't edify anyone. Ecstatic speech was practiced by pagans and some Jews at that time as it was thought to be a spiritual act. **The plural form of "tongues"** in **I Cor. 14** is used for the miraculous gift of speaking in a known language that was unknown to the one speaking, such as recorded in **Acts 2**.	*Singular*	does not speak to men but God	vs. 2
	Singular	no one understands	vs. 2
	Singular	speaks mysteries	vs. 2
	Singular	edifies himself	vs. 4
	Plural	something good but less than prophesying	vs. 5
	Plural	If interpreted equal to prophesying because church is edified.	vs. 5
	Plural	If not interpreted there is no profit [edification].	vss. 6-8
	Plural	If not interpreted you are speaking into the air.	vs. 9
	Plural	Tongues are languages in the world that have meaning.	vs. 10
	Plural	If spoken in a tongue which is not interpreted you will sound like a barbarian to them.	vs. 11
	Plural	If you hear a tongue that is not interpreted the one speaking will be like a barbarian to you.	vs. 11
	Plural	Tongues must be interpreted so the church can be edified.	vs. 12
	Singular	Pray to interpret.	vs. 13
	Singular	Praying in a tongue is unfruitful because you don't know what you are praying for.	vss. 14-15
	Singular	Praying in a tongue should not be done because others don't know what you are saying and can't say "Amen!"	vs. 16
	Singular	Praying in a tongue does not edify.	vs. 17
	Plural	Paul had the gift of tongues.	vs. 18
	Singular	Better to speak in the church five intelligible words than ten thousand words in a tongue that people can't understand.	vs. 19
Its purpose for unbelievers not believers vss. 20-25	**Plural**	The gift of tongues was prophesied.	vs. 21
	Plural	Tongues are for a sign for unbelievers.	vs. 22
	Plural	Tongues are not for believers.	vs. 22
	Plural	If everyone in the church spoke in tongues unbelievers visiting would think the church was mad. They would not be saved and it would harm the testimony of the church.	vs. 23

Focus of section	Plural or Singular	Information about tongues	Verse/s
Note: In **vss. 26-27** the singular "a tongue" is used of the biblical gift of tongues. This is made clear because **vs. 26** says it can be interpreted, ecstatic speech cannot. Paul previously stated that ecstatic speech "a tongue" is a mystery **(vs. 2)**, is not a known language **(vs. 10)**, the mind is unfruitful **(vs. 14)**, is not understood **(vs. 16)** and does not edify **(vs. 4, 17)**.		If you do speak in a tongue that can be interpreted make sure it is only used for the edification of the church, i.e. all tongues used in the church must be interpreted.	vs. 26
		If you do speak in a tongue it should be one or two or three at the most with an interpreter, otherwise you shouldn't do it.	vs. 27
Its use in the church vss. 26--40	**Plural**	If you speak in tongues you must interpret or else not speak.	vs. 28
	Plural	Women are not to speak in the church (so as to teach) either by prophecy or by tongues but are to remain quiet.	vss. 34-35
	Plural	If someone does have the gift of tongues they should not be forbidden to use it as long as they meet the criteria listed above and always in a proper and orderly manner.	vss. 39-40

IV. ERRORS CONCERNING THE GIFT OF TONGUES

A. Error – The gift of tongues is for the edification of one's self.

B. Error – It is okay if you don't interpret the gift of tongues, the important thing is that you speak in tongues.

C. Error – If someone claims to have the gift of tongues and another person claims to be able to interpret, we should believe what they say, not doubt them, examine them, compare what they say with the Word of God, or treat them as a false teacher if what they say doesn't come true.

D. Error – To utter ecstatic speech, even though we, nor anyone else knows what we are saying, is just as edifying to the body of Christ as speaking with plain words.

E. Error – Sometimes the gift of tongues doesn't match up to the Word of God, but it is still of the Holy Spirit.

F. Error – The gift of tongues is a gift everyone should have.

G. Error – The gift of tongues is for self edification.

H. Error – The gift of tongues is only to be expressed in prayer.

I. Error – The gift of tongues is the most important gift.

J. Error – The gift of tongues can be used any way a person who has the gift wants to use it, both inside and outside the church.

K. Error – The gift of tongues is a sign of conversion.

L. Error – The gift of tongues is a sign of the fulness of the Spirit.

M. Error – The gift of tongues is a sign of spiritual maturity.

V. APPLICATION OF THE GIFT OF TONGUES

The gift of tongues was one of the sign gifts given by God to the early church to verify the coming of the promised Holy Spirit and the establishment of the church. It was also given to communicate the gospel to unbelievers who spoke in different languages during the early days of the church while the New Testament was being written. In Acts the gift of tongues was given first to a select group of Jews, second to a select group of Samaritans, third to a select group of Gentiles and finally to a select group of John the Baptists' disciples who hadn't heard of the complete gospel and the giving of the Holy Spirit. The book of Acts and church history verifies that tongues ceased to be given as the New Testament was completed. While many today claim to have the gift of tongues, what they claim is the gift of tongues doesn't match what the Word of God says.

If God did choose to give the gift of tongues today, even though the New Testament has been completed and the Bible says it will be done away with, as history has proven, it would still need to be: **1)** a sign for unbelievers, **2)** a known language, unknown to the speaker, **3)** interpreted in public worship, **4)** no more than two or three at the most could speak in public worship and never women, and **5)** must promote order, not confusion or chaos in the church. Yet, the Scriptures and church history verify that the gift of tongues has ceased. It fulfilled its temporary purpose.