

Question: "What is the gift of speaking in tongues?"

Answer: The first occurrence of speaking in tongues occurred on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:1-4. The apostles went out and shared the gospel with the crowds, speaking to them in their own languages: "We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" (Acts 2:11). The Greek word translated tongues literally means "languages." Therefore, the gift of tongues is speaking in a language a person does not know in order to minister to someone who does speak that language. In 1 Corinthians chapters 12–14, Paul discusses miraculous gifts, saying, "Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction?" (1 Corinthians 14:6). According to the apostle Paul, and in agreement with the tongues described in Acts, speaking in tongues is valuable to the one hearing God's message in his or her own language, but it is useless to everyone else unless it is interpreted/translated.

A person with the gift of interpreting tongues (1 Corinthians 12:30) could understand what a tongues-speaker was saying even though he did not know the language that was being spoken. The tongues interpreter would then communicate the message of the tongues speaker to everyone else, so all could understand. "For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says" (1 Corinthians 14:13). Paul's conclusion regarding tongues that were not interpreted is powerful: "But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue" (1 Corinthians 14:19).

Is the gift of tongues for today? First Corinthians 13:8 mentions the gift of tongues ceasing, although it connects the ceasing with the arrival of the "perfect" in 1 Corinthians 13:10. Some point to a difference in the tense of the Greek verbs referring to prophecy and knowledge "ceasing" and that of tongues "being ceased" as evidence for tongues ceasing before the arrival of the "perfect." While possible, this is not explicitly clear from the text. Some also point to passages such as Isaiah 28:11 and Joel 2:28-29 as evidence that speaking in tongues was a sign of God's oncoming judgment. First Corinthians 14:22 describes tongues as a "sign to unbelievers." According to this argument, the gift of tongues was a warning to the Jews that God was going to judge Israel for rejecting Jesus Christ as Messiah. Therefore, when God did in fact judge Israel (with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70), the gift of tongues would no longer serve its intended purpose. While this view is possible, the primary purpose of tongues being fulfilled does not necessarily demand its cessation. Scripture does not conclusively assert that the gift of speaking in tongues has ceased.

At the same time, if the gift of speaking in tongues were active in the church today, it would be performed in agreement with Scripture. It would be a real and intelligible language (1 Corinthians 14:10). It would be for the purpose of communicating God's Word with a person of another language (Acts 2:6-12). It would be in agreement with the command God gave through the apostle Paul, "If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God" (1 Corinthians 14:27-28). It would also be in accordance with 1 Corinthians 14:33, "For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints."

God most definitely can give a person the gift of speaking in tongues to enable him or her to communicate with a person who speaks another language. The Holy Spirit is sovereign in the dispersion of the spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:11). Just imagine how much more productive missionaries could be if they did not have to go to language school, and were instantly able to speak to people in their own language. However, God does not seem to be doing this. Tongues does not seem to occur today in the manner it did in the New Testament, despite the fact that it would be immensely useful. The vast majority of believers who claim to practice the gift of speaking in tongues do not do so in agreement with the Scriptures mentioned above. These facts lead to the conclusion that the gift of tongues has ceased or is at least a rarity in God's plan for the church today.

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