

THE GIFT OF TONGUES

The gift of tongues was a divinely bestowed supernatural ability to speak in a human language that had not been learned by the one speaking. On the day of Pentecost, Luke records in Acts 2:6, “Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galileans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?”

It’s important to note that on the day of Pentecost, the day that marks the beginning of the church, that there was spoken a known dialect (language). And this known dialect was not a learned language by the one speaking (v. 7), but the hearers heard the words in their own language (v. 8).

The Apostle Paul said, “If any man speak in an *unknown* tongue, *let it be* by two, or at most *by* three, and *that* by course; and let one interpret” (1 Corinthians 14:27). The word “*unknown*” in this verse is in italics in your English Bible, and that means it is not in the original Greek. Now I don’t have time, or the space, to explain why the translators used this word. But one thing is clear if you leave the word out: There is no secret language, only known by the spiritual. There is no heavenly language, only known by the spiritual. In fact, nowhere in Scripture does it speak of unknown tongues. The word *unknown* is in italics.

Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 14:27 says, when believers exercised the gift of tongues in church, they were to speak one at a time, and only two or three were to speak in a given service. When you read 1 Corinthians 14:5, 13, and 27, you will see that when tongues were spoken in the church, they were to be interpreted by someone with the gift of interpretation so that the others might be edified. In Acts 2:6 no interpreter was needed, but by the time we get to 1 Corinthians, an interpreter is needed – something has changed. The change was important because God never intended that tongues serve as a primary prayer language, but as a means by which one might serve and edify the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:7).

In 1 Corinthians 13:8, Paul made an interesting statement, “Charity never faileth: but whether *there be* prophecies they shall fail; whether *there be* tongues, they shall cease; whether *there be* knowledge, it shall vanish away.”

The expression “Charity never faileth: means that Charity [love] “will never decay” or “be abolished”. Paul is not saying that love is invincible or that it cannot be rejected. But he was saying that love is eternal – it shall never be done away. However, “prophecies [the gifts of prophecy] they shall fail.” In other words, they will be done away. Tongues, they “shall cease”. Teachers of the Greek language tell us that “the verb used in ‘shall cease’ means ‘to cease permanently,’ and implies that when tongues ceased, they would never start again.”

Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 13:8 raises a natural question. If tongues were supposed to cease, has that already happened, or is it yet future? Charismatic believers say that none of the gifts have ceased yet, so for them, the cessation of tongues is yet future. Most non-charismatic believers say that tongues have already ceased, passing away with the apostolic age.

In 1 Corinthians 13:13, Paul speaks of three virtues: "faith, hope" and "charity". These three "abideth" after all the gifts have ceased. The word "abideth" refers to something that is lasting – something that will not cease. The word abideth also speaks of those things that have ceased, namely tongues.

Miracle gifts like tongues and healing are mentioned only in 1 Corinthians, an early epistle. Two later epistles, Ephesians and Romans, both discuss gifts of the Spirit at length – but no mention is made of the miraculous gifts. By that time, miracles were already looked on as something of the past (Hebrews 2:3-4). Apostolic authority and the apostolic message needed no further confirmation. Before the first century ended, the entire New Testament had been written and was circulating through the churches. And the revelatory gifts had ceased to serve any purpose. Therefore, Scripture and history indicate that tongues ceased in the apostolic age.

Tongues were a sign gift. One writer said, "Tongues were therefore a sign of transition between the Old and New Covenants. With the establishment of the new church, a new day had dawned for the people of God. God would speak in all languages. But once the period of transition was past, the sign was no longer necessary. The church meets for the edification of the body, not self-gratification or personal experience-seeking. Therefore, tongues had limited usefulness in the church, and so it was never intended to be a permanent gift."

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