

## QUESTION: Speaking in Tongues

When topics such as the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts are discussed, the question of “speaking in tongues” often surfaces. The Phenomenon called “speaking in tongues” occurs where a person either prays or speaks in an unknown language, normally unintelligible to persons within earshot. Some Christians believe that “tongues” is evidence of the filling and power of the Holy Spirit. Controversies over this manifestation have driven a wedge between Christians for centuries, resulting in strong opinions that often polarize groups of Christians.

Three basic positions on “speaking in tongues” are common among today’s Christians.

(1) Some believe that this phenomenon is *the* primary evidence of the Holy Spirit’s filling. Every Christian should experience speaking in tongues as evidence of their yieldedness to the Spirit. Person’s holding this viewpoint may question the spirituality or commitment of those who do not speak in tongues.

(2) Some Christians insist that the gift of tongues is *not* distributed by the Spirit today. They believe the supernatural manifestation of “speaking in tongues” stopped back in the first century. It was a temporary means of God employed to authenticate the message and authority of the original apostles. No one who claims to speak in tongues does so under the influence of God’s Spirit. Their so-called “gift” is either a psychological manifestation, or possibly even demonic in origin. (You can imagine the discord that erupts during doctrinal conversations among persons holding these first two views!)

(3) A middle-of-the-road position acknowledges that God may still allocate the gift of tongues. Except it isn’t meant for every Christian, nor is it the primary evidence of the Spirit’s filling. A Christian does *not* have to speak in tongues in order to be “Spirit-filled.”

In his discussion on the subject, Paul pointed out that no one has all the spiritual gifts. “All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? All do not have gifts of healing, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they?” (1 Cor 12:29-30). The Greek construction in Paul’s questions demands or assumes a “no” answer. Imagine a teenager leaving on a date with an outfit that was totally inappropriate and unkept hair. Her father stops her at the door and says, “You aren’t going out looking like that, *are you?*” No matter how the teen responds, it’s the father’s conviction that the appropriate answer is “yes.”

The third stance on the issue of tongues is our preference. Who are we to say that God will never bestow this gift on a believer? Yet we’re convinced that the gift is not something God intends for everyone.

On the Day of Pentecost, some of the disciples spoke in tongues (Acts 2:4). Visitors to Jerusalem who gathered around Jesus’ followers heard the gospel proclaimed in their own language (Acts 2:6-11). Miraculously, the Holy Spirit either took the one language spoken by Jesus’ followers, and translated it so the multitudes heard the words in their own languages or gave Jesus’ followers the ability to speak in languages unknown to them! The gift of tongues Paul referred to (1 Cor 12-14) was a different phenomenon. Persons within earshot of someone deploying this gift did not hear the words in a known human language. That’s why Paul insisted that any incident of tongues during a church service required the presence of an interpreter—someone with a God-given ability to understand and convey the meaning for everyone present (1 Cor 14:26-28).

Billy Graham wrote, “I am certain about one thing. When the gift of tongues is abused, it becomes divisive and something has gone wrong.” Graham elaborated on this subject by offering the following perspectives:

The gift of tongues mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12-14 is one of the least important gifts in the body of Christ. Paul said that “one who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church” (1 Cor 14:4). He implied that gifts such as teaching eclipse tongues in importance (1 Cor 14:19).

Tongues is a *gift* of the Holy Spirit, not a *fruit* of the Holy Spirit. Our concern should be on the character that we know God desires for all Christians (Gal 5:22-23). God isn't pleased when we're preoccupied with His gifts instead of His character.

Speaking in tongues is *not necessarily* a sign of the baptism of the believer by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ, as some believers assert. This is particularly true in the Corinthian context since they had already become part of the body of Christ. No Scripture exists claiming that tongues is a required evidence of the Spirit's baptism of a believer into the church. Nor is tongues a necessary manifestation of the filling of the Spirit. A Christian may spend a lifetime walking in the Spirit's fullness and never speak in tongues.

The issue of speaking in tongues should be approached sensitively, since it is readily abused and open to a variety of interpretations. The fact that Paul devoted most of 1 Corinthians 14 to the problems it caused in the early church reveals its explosive and controversial nature.

Pressure by proponents of speaking in tongues has been known to result in counterfeit displays of the phenomenon. Graham tells of a young lady whose close circle of friends all spoke in tongues. She wanted to fit in and find acceptance among them. So she prayed publicly in a known foreign language, which she had acquired while growing up overseas. None of her friends knew that language. She pretended to "speak in tongues" and completely fooled her peers.

Persons who receive a genuine gift of tongues don't employ it to attract attention, nor do they boast of it to others. Graham knew Corrie Ten Boom, whose story was chronicled in [The Hiding Place](#). He said she had experienced the gift of tongues—yet she never publicized that fact nor discussed it in a group. She was known to rebuke Christians who persisted in discussing their experience with the gift of tongues.

A. B. Simpson, founder of the Christian Missionary Alliance said, "Seek not, forbid not." The church would do well to heed his wise counsel today.

Our best advice is to seek the Giver diligently—not particular gifts. God "is a rewarder of those who seek Him" (Heb 11:6). Let Him decide whether your rewards include a miraculous gift such as tongues. Whoever is zealous to acquire the gifts of tongues should channel their fever into service for God. The result will be fulfillment of the Great Commission, and less divisiveness within the church.

The above statement is contained in its entirety in the following resource:

Jones, Bill and Powell, Terry. *Experiencing Power for Christ-Like Living*. Crossover Communications International. Columbia, SC. 1998.