

## **The Gift of Tongues**

### **1 Corinthians 14**

#### **Introduction:**

1. There has been no spiritual gift that has caused more confusion and debate within the church as the gift of tongues. Thankfully, as we enter chapter 14 we discover that Paul devotes an entire chapter to this subject.
2. In **1 Corinthians 13:8** Paul predicted that there would come a time when tongues shall cease. Clearly he is speaking of the **gift** of tongues in the context.
3. While there is a myriad of differing beliefs on the gift of tongues, we could boil them all down to three:
  - Some believe that the gift of tongues is operative and essential to salvation today.
  - Some believe that the gift of tongues is operative today, but not every believer will exercise the gift.
  - Some believe that the gift of tongues has in fact ceased today.
4. In this lesson we will examine exactly what the gift of tongues is Biblically, what was its purpose, and why has it ceased.

#### **What was the gift of tongues in the Bible?**

1. This was the supernatural ability to speak in a language that had never been learned. It was an unknown tongue to the speaker. **Acts 2:5-8, 11**
2. The word "tongue" means "language." The gift of tongues was not the ability to speak in a string of gibberish. There is nothing supernatural about this. This profits nobody and can easily be faked or simply learned.
3. But let's say there was a person from Germany in our church and they did not know English. I begin to witness to them and German begins flowing from my lips. This would be supernatural because I don't know a word of German. It is an unknown tongue to me.
4. At the tower of Babel God scattered the people by confusing their tongues. They no longer could communicate. In order to evangelize nations with the gospel, this obstacle must be overcome.
5. God gave the early church the gift of tongues to overcome this obstacle. The city of Corinth was a metropolis and a melting pot of different nationalities that came there for commerce. Many in the church had this gift of tongues and could communicate God's truth in this supernatural way.
6. But this gift was being abused and counterfeited by many. It led to the church becoming a three-ring circus and Paul devotes an entire chapter dealing with these abuses.
7. How do we overcome language barriers today in sharing the gospel?
  - We send our missionaries to language school and they learn the language of the people they are trying to reach with the gospel. Many times it takes years to master the language.
8. If in fact the true Biblical gift of tongues is operative today, charismatic churches should never have a need to send their missionaries to language school or speak through an interpreter when visiting the mission field.

## How many times do we see the gift of tongues exercised in God's Word?

1. There are only three instances in the entire Word of God where the gift of tongues is actually exercised.
2. The three instances are Acts 2, 10, and 19.
3. With the exception of the book of 1 Corinthians, the gift of tongues is never referred to in any of the epistles of Paul.
4. The gift was not as common as charismatics would lead people to believe. It was a rare occurrence in isolated situations, and mentioned in only one very metropolitan church.

## What was the purpose of the gift of tongues?

1. There is no way to understand why tongues have ceased until you first understand the purpose of the gift of tongues.
2. God sheds great light on the purpose of the gift of tongues in **1 Corinthians 14:22**. It clearly states, *"Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not..."*
3. One thing is clear. The gift of tongues was a sign to unbelievers. In the context (vs. 21) it is obvious that Paul had unbelieving Israel in mind. When we cross-reference 1:22 we find that *"The Jews require a sign..."*
  - The nation of Israel was born through the use of miraculous signs. **Exodus 4:30-31**
  - Because of their stubbornness and unbelief, God has always dealt with Israel through the use of miraculous signs. **Psalm 74:9**
  - In the Old Testament, strange tongues were a sign to Israel of impending judgment. **Isaiah 28:11-12; Jeremiah 5:15; Deuteronomy 28:15-68**
4. Are you beginning to see the picture? Tongues are **for** a sign. The Jews **require** a sign.
5. Where was the church at Corinth started? It was started literally on the other side of the wall of the Jewish synagogue. Why? Because the Jews had opposed the gospel and blasphemed against the message of Christ. **Acts 18:6-8**
  - As Israel observed these pagan Gentiles demonstrating **their** sign gifts, it was a testimony that God had left them and gone among the Gentiles.
  - It was physical, visible evidence (which the Jews required) that God was now among the Gentiles and judgment was imminent if Israel did not repent.
  - As they saw their spiritual possessions now going to the Gentiles, it was to provoke them to jealousy that they might come to Christ and be saved. **Romans 11:11, 13-14**
6. This explains why such a carnal church as Corinth had the physical, visible evidence of God's Holy Spirit at work through these miraculous sign gifts (1:6-7). It was to confirm the testimony of Christ to Israel next door (1:22, 14:22).
  - The gift of tongues was not evidence of their spirituality. Many charismatics today make other people feel like second class Christians if they don't speak in tongues.

- God didn't give the Corinthians the gift of tongues because of their great spirituality (3:1-4). There was a much deeper purpose for the manifestation of this gift.
7. To put it simply, the gift of tongues was a sign gift for Israel with a two-fold purpose.
    - First, it was used to authenticate the early infant church and its apostles, as well as the addition of Gentiles into the church. It was the sign of tongues that kept Peter out of hot water with his Jewish brethren after going to the Gentiles.  
**Acts 11:17-18**
    - Second, it was used as a sign of impending judgment upon Israel.
  8. Tongues are for a sign. The Jews require a sign. To say anything else is to stretch, add to, or change the Word of God.
  9. This would explain why we never see tongues spoken unless there were Jews present.

### **When did the gift of tongues cease?**

1. In **1 Corinthians 13:8** God said that tongues would one day cease. He wasn't saying that people would one day stop talking in languages. He is speaking of the **gift** of tongues.
  - He says that "tongues shall cease" which means "to stop, restrain, quit, come to an end."
  - When it says tongues "*shall cease*", this is the middle/active voice indicating that tongues will come to an end in and of themselves as their purpose is done.
2. Remember, tongues were for a sign, and the Jews require a sign. All throughout the book of Acts, God is doing two things:
  - Calling the nation of Israel to repentance for crucifying their Messiah.
  - Realizing Israel's constant rejection, God simultaneously begins calling out His church, the body of Christ.
3. Throughout the book of Acts, Israel is still in the picture. Paul was taking the gospel to them first, but they would reject it. Paul would then take the gospel to the Gentiles in hopes that it might provoke the Jews to jealousy and cause them to turn to Christ. **Romans 11:11-14**
4. The book of Acts records for us the fall and diminishing of Israel. How long does Paul's provoking ministry to Israel last?
5. It culminates in **Acts 28:27-28**. Israel would not heed God's signs (such as tongues), so God pronounces a final, declarative statement of judgment, turning from the Jews and sending salvation to the Gentiles.
  - Soon after this, the Roman Emperor, Titus, entered Jerusalem with his troops, sacked and burned Jerusalem, burned Israel's temple, and scattered Israel among the nations.
  - Paul never addresses Israel as a nation again in any of the books that he wrote after Acts 28. He calls himself, "*The prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles.*"
  - In the book of Acts we see Paul as a man whose heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved (**Romans 10:1**). After Acts 28 this is no longer the case. Neither Israel nor the sign gift of tongues is ever mentioned again.

- One day God will continue His prophetic program with Israel and will keep His covenant promises to them, but during this dispensation of grace, the prophetic program has been temporarily suspended.
6. Tongues ceased right around the Acts 28 time period. With Israel out of the picture, there was no reason for their further existence. They had fulfilled their purpose.  
**Tongues are for a sign, the Jews require a sign.**
- 1 Corinthians was written during this Acts time period (around Acts 20) when the gift of tongues was still very operative.
7. In light of all of this, Paul wrote to the carnal Corinthian church to make them realize that tongues were a temporary sign gift for Israel to be used in the infancy stages of the church. **1 Corinthians 14**
- **Verse 20** - Don't be infants in understanding, but recognize why the gift of tongues has been given. Don't get caught up in childish things. 13:11
  - **Verse 21** - Remember Isaiah's prophecy and the reason for the gift of tongues.
  - **Verse 22** - Tongues are a sign gift to unbelieving Israel.

## **The three times tongues are spoken in the Bible**

### **Acts 2**

- Tongues were given as a **sign** to unbelieving **Israel** who had rejected Jesus Christ as their Messiah.
- They were a sign that Christ was raised from the dead and He was their Messiah. They needed to repent and turn to Him.

### **Acts 10**

- Tongues were given as a **sign** to skeptical **Jews** that proved that Gentiles could also turn to Christ and receive God's Holy Spirit. It was the sign gift of tongues that convinced the Jews in Acts 11:15-18.

### **Acts 19**

- Tongues were a **sign** to twelve **Jewish** men that had been following John the Baptist's message, and had never heard of Christ or the Holy Spirit.
- They believed on Christ and were baptized in His name and received the sign gift of tongues as confirmation that Paul's message was correct.

### **Tongues are for a sign. 1 Corinthians 14:22**

### **The Jews require a sign. 1 Corinthians 1:22**

It is important to note that in each case, tongues were definite languages spoken. They were languages that were unknown to the one speaking. There is nothing to indicate in any of these texts that the speakers spoke some kind of unintelligible gibberish.

- In Acts 2, men from over 15 nations heard the apostles speaking in their own languages.
- In Acts 10, Peter and his men heard these Gentiles speaking in languages, otherwise how would they have known that they were magnifying God (vs. 46)?
- In Acts 19, how would they have known that they were prophesying (vs. 6) if it was an unintelligible babbling.