

PREFACE

We now come to the bottom of this list of Spirit-gifts and to what Gordon Fee has referred to as “the problem child” of the various gifts. Yet again I must point out that not everyone agrees on this particular gift: they do not agree on what the apostle Paul is saying, and they do not agree on whether or not there are, or should be, “tongues” today. Keep in mind that Paul is still on-topic; his overarching point is proper, respectable, God-honoring, well-ordered corporate worship. In first-century Corinth the speaking in tongues was part of that worship, and in Chapter Fourteen Paul will issue details for their proper use.

Though Paul will discourse at length on tongues in Chapter Fourteen, I am not comfortable tabling any discussion of this gift until then (as [John MacArthur](#)). So far I have offered thumbnail sketches of the various gifts in this passage, and I want to do the same with this gift. Of course to do so we will draw from the information in Chapter Fourteen, but I see no harm in a little repetition if we touch on it again in that chapter. This is a controversial topic today in Christendom, so we should be well-equipped by God’s truth on the matter.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:7-11.**10B**

...to another various kinds of tongues,

Let’s look first at the operative words. The word “various,” or “different” (KJV: “divers”) has been added to the Greek text by the editors to modify *gene* (*gen’aye*), translated “kinds” in all of our versions. We get the word “genus” from this word; *gene* can be translated family, race, or nation (a people); class, sort, or kind.

The word translated “tongues” is the Greek *glosson* (*glow’-sahn*), [from a root meaning a projecting point](#). Originally the word *glossa* meant the physical tongue, but came to stand for the faculty of speech, utterance, language, dialect—that is, that which is produced by the tongue.

Individuals speaking in tongues occurred first at Pentecost when the apostles were given the Holy Spirit. Here the supernatural speaking in tongues—other languages—was used by God to validate the presence of the Spirit now in the apostles.

Read Acts 2:1-4.

It is clear from the text that the *result* of this phenomenon in Acts 2 was not an ecstatic gibberish that no one understood, or that required a translator for those hearing it. To the contrary, the phenomenon was that those who *spoke* different languages, *heard in their own language* what the apostles were speaking! That is, either the apostles spoke in these languages (heretofore unknown to them), or (better) they all spoke in a language that was then translated by the Holy Spirit into the foreign tongue of each person present. That is, the phenomenon was not necessarily the speaking, but the *hearing*.

Read Acts 2:5-11.

In this event at Pentecost, no interpreters were necessary; the Holy Spirit *was* the translator. Many commentators say that since “speaking in tongues” at Pentecost referred to earthly foreign languages, then the same template must be applied to the church in Corinth. That is, speaking in tongues always means speaking in an earthly foreign language (heretofore unknown to the speaker). But why must that be the case?

For our look at the gift of tongues in v10, I would like to offer a concise list of bullet points, each backed up by passages in Chapter Fourteen. When we eventually get to that chapter, these points will be examined in greater depth. The gift of tongues is...

Spirit-inspired

“Kinds of tongues” is included in a list of various manifestations of the Spirit (v7), and v11 reiterates this truth with, “But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.”

a Language

The modern incarnation of this gift is essentially an ecstatic, uncontrolled, incoherent babbling. This is not the picture from God’s word. It is clear from Chapter Fourteen that while the speaker’s rational mind may not be engaged (v14:14), this person is not in a trance, or otherwise out of control.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:27-28.

Those are not instructions for someone experiencing an ecstatic seizure, stringing together meaningless syllables. “Tongues consist of words (*logoi*), which, though indecipherable, are not meaningless” (Garland).

Addressed to God

The gift of tongues produces communication addressed to God, not man.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:2.

...and to another the interpretation of tongues.

It is the Holy Spirit energizing our own spirit to form unearthly prayer and praise for the ears of God alone. And even if it is interpreted, the message is not *for* the congregation, but to just describe for them the gist of the message delivered from the speaker to God.

A High-status Gift

As in some churches today, in Corinth the gift of tongues was considered a high-status indicator—indicative of a higher level of spirituality. This was contributing to the atmosphere of conflict in the church.

Not a Known Earthly Language

While we do not have a one-verse proof text for this, we can infer from all of Chapter Fourteen that the language being spoken in Corinth was not the same as in Acts 2. There the “tongues” required no interpreter because the *purpose* of the words being spoken was to witness the gospel to those present who were from foreign lands. Either each apostle was speaking the recipient’s (earthly) language, or the Spirit translated what was being spoken for each person of a different language.

In Corinth the Spirit-gift of tongues was manifested in a different way: the words being spoken were an *unearthly* language directed to God alone; if employed in corporate worship, an interpreter was necessary to inform the congregation of the nature of the communication. In private prayer, no interpreter was required, since God (the sole recipient) already knew the language. This brings us to the inevitable question:

What was/is the language?

None of our commentators broach the answer to this—at least not in their discussion of *this* verse. Neither do they (save for Gordon Fee, who reveals his “Pentecostal heritage”) voice an opinion on whether or not this particular gift remains active in the church today. Permit me to close this session with my own thoughts on the matter. First, the evidence.

Read Romans 8:22-23, 26-27.

Here is the picture of the Holy Spirit within each believer translating our “groans” into “groans” of his own. I have always read this to mean that we groan and the Spirit turns our groans into words, but the text actually says something different. As the late, great Donald Barnhouse puts it in his classic study of the Romans letter, “And here we read that ‘likewise’ the Holy Spirit is helping us, interceding with groanings which cannot be uttered. This adverb likewise, in the same manner must refer to the operation of the Holy Spirit groaning within us as we groan in the midst of a groaning creation.”

Now, before I draw a conclusion from this, let's return to Corinthians and look at two more brief passages.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1.

Here Paul draws a distinction between “the tongues of men,” and “the [tongues] of angels.” One more passage.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:3-4.

In the past I have often used the phrase “the language of heaven” in reference to such passages—sometimes poetically, sometimes literally. I would suggest—I cannot be dogmatic about this—that the biblically sound (i.e., according to Paul's commands in 1 Corinthians 14) demonstrations of the gift of tongues, in either corporate worship or the private prayer closet, are instances of the indwelling Holy Spirit taking the inner, inexpressible thoughts and passions, worship and praise of the believer and expressing them—Spirit to Father—in the literal language of heaven.

On 2 Corinthians 12:4:

Peter Lange: The substance of the communication was so exalted that it would have been a profanation to give it in human language. W. F. Besser: “It is likely that the substance of the heavenly words was taken up by the Apostle as he heard them, but he felt that no man after receiving such a communication in successive details, could find language adequately and worthily to express what he had heard in that sacred presence. And even if God had given him power to express on earth what he had heard in heaven, there were no earthly ears which could intelligently receive the communication.”

Albert Barnes: Paul meant to say that he could not attempt by words to do justice to what he saw and heard. The use of the word “words” here would seem to imply that he heard the language of exalted praise; or that there were truths imparted to his mind which he could not hope to convey in any language spoken by people... It might be also true that it would not have been possible for language to convey clearly the ideas connected with the things which Paul was then permitted to see; but the main thought is, that there was some reason why it would not be proper for him to have attempted to communicate those ideas to people at large.

We often hear someone say that a word or phrase does not translate well from, say, French to English, or Hebrew to English. There are things we wish to say to God that cannot be put into human words; to even attempt to do so would somehow cheapen them. The Holy Spirit overcomes this weakness in humans by taking those thoughts, those emotions, those inexpressible words of praise and translates them for us into the native language of the Godhead—words and sounds it is impossible for the human ear to translate. More often than not this communion is accomplished silently (to human ears); at other times the Spirit chooses to employ human vocal cords—i.e., speaking in tongues.

Is this gift still active today? If the guidelines of Chapter Fourteen are observed, I see no reason why not. After all, why would Paul, under the inspiration of this same Spirit, have taken such time and care to specify such guidelines if the Spirit-gift would have soon come to an end?

v11

But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.

No matter what, this is all of God, through His Spirit, and not of us, by us, or about us. Charles Haddon Spurgeon summarizes this nicely.

C. H. Spurgeon: Whatever our gifts as a church, or as individuals, may be, they all come from the selfsame Spirit. This should tend to promote unity amongst us. Let us all trace whatever gift we have to the hand that gave it, and to the Spirit that wrought it; let us feel that we are so many pipes connected with one fountain; and, therefore, as all the good that we convey comes from the one source, let us give all the honour and glory of it to the Spirit of God from Whom it comes.