

...I will pray with my spirit...
The Spiritual Gift of Tongues

Introduction

This spiritual gift has been a source of great blessing within the body of Christ as well as the subject of much dispute and opinion. Even at Church on the Mountain there are, no doubt, various ideas and opinions as to how, when, who and perhaps even if this gift is to be used. Therefore, it seems important to put into writing the conviction that best expresses the heart of the leadership team here. We do not want to do this to exclude those of differing opinions from fellowship with our church. Rather we want to express what we believe and how we desire to see this gift expressed in our church so that people will understand our position and know why we do what we do.

First of all, we are a “charismatic” congregation. This word was attached to a revival movement that our fellowship was birthed from in the late sixties / early seventies. The term “charismatic” is taken from the Greek word “charis” or “gift” used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 and various places in the New Testament. It refers to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The “charismatic movement” saw a resurgence of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in many mainline denominations including the Roman Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the Lutheran Church.....and also saw many new churches planted that had no direct affiliation with larger denominations (i.e., Calvary Chapel and Vineyard Christian Fellowships). These gifts were already acknowledged and experienced regularly in the Pentecostal churches such as the Foursquare and the Assembly of God denominations. Seeing them so widely distributed and affecting the spiritual life of such a diverse group of churches, gave rise to the acknowledgement that something new regarding the gifts of the Holy Spirit was indeed happening. Thus the name “charismatic movement” was attached and eventually stuck to this renewal movement.

This movement, along with the Pentecostal churches, would trace their roots to an earlier revival movement that occurred in Los Angeles in 1906 termed the “Azusa Street Revival”. The gifts of the Spirit were in great evidence during these years as well.

But the deepest roots of all come from the book of Acts and the day of Pentecost. This initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Promise of the Father, and the blast of spiritual power and gifting has propelled the church through two millennia. The gift of tongues was prominent on that day and later, in Paul’s writings, we are led to believe that tongues was normative in the life of the early church.

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The gift of tongues was merely one of the gifts mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 but because of its close association with the baptism in the Holy Spirit this gift was given special prominence. (This is especially highlighted in classical Pentecostal theology. Among those churches, tongues is viewed as the initial evidence that someone has been baptized in the Holy Spirit.)

For a deeper understanding of how we view this gift and the baptism of the Holy Spirit (which is different than the classical Pentecostal perspective) see the study on the “Baptism in the Holy Spirit” written by Eric Stovesand and available from Church on the Mountain, Crowley Lake, CA.

It may be important to note that this phenomenon was not without its abuses and controversies in both early church accounts (see 1 Corinthians) and more recently, the “Azusa Street Revival” earlier in the 20th century and the charismatic movement of the late 1960’s and 70’s. This, however, in no way invalidates what the Lord was doing in pouring out His Spirit. God was moving then and continues to move today to all who believe in this wonderful dimension of His life. It is our heritage and has swept the world with its demonstration of His power and love.

Understanding the Gift

Let’s look at some of the verses that have direct bearing on the practical application of this gift in our church life by answering some commonly asked questions:

What exactly is the gift of tongues?

1 Corinthians 14:2

For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. NIV

From this verse we get the idea that tongues can be communication to God, a prayer, or a language unique in that it is designed to communicate only to God, thus, a prayer language. Also distinctive is the fact that no one understands what is being said. The content of this communication is said to be a mystery.

1 Corinthians 14:4

He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. NIV

From this verse we know that speaking in tongues has an edifying effect on the person speaking. It somehow builds the speaker up even though he does not understand what is being said.

1 Corinthians 14:5

He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he

seeming stringent guidelines regarding women speaking in the church.

1 Corinthians 14:33-35

33 As in all the congregations of the saints, 34 women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. 35 If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. NIV

Few would interpret this in its strictest sense and never allow a woman to speak in the church. This verse must be understood in its context both literally as well as culturally. Are all the exhortations regarding spiritual gifts meant only for the male gender? Without answering all the questions raised regarding women in ministry, we must opt for a broader answer. Paul is speaking generically to the church body not exclusively to men. In other verses we notice that Phillip has four daughters that are named as prophetesses. (Acts 21:8-9) Where are they to prophesy?

Spiritual gifts are to be pursued (by both men and women) and exercised in the local assembly (the church) for the edification of the whole body. Everything is to be done in an orderly manner. When the gifts of the Holy Spirit are in operation it may introduce a foreign atmosphere to someone not yet a Christian, or perhaps, a Christian that has never been exposed to the gifts. We should strive to bring understanding to every hungry heart. But we should also stand firm in the freedom of the Holy Spirit and enjoy His glorious presence and the wonderful gifts of the His Spirit.

1 Corinthians 14:39-40

39 Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. 40 But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way. NIV

be room for someone to pray in their ‘prayer language’ over another person in certain instances when prompted to do so and when the setting or people involved would not be distracted by such praying.

When we consider the prayer language of tongues as an intercessory gift we can find some insight from Romans 8:26-27.

26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. NIV

These ‘Spirit birthed prayers’ in groans (Gk *stenagmois* also in *Acts 7:34* 34 “I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free.” NIV) that words cannot express can be understood as the prayer language of tongues. It may be that the scope of such praying is broader than praying in tongues but it certainly must include it. In this sense it should be celebrated as a wonderful addition to our private praying as an individual, in groups or more specifically for another person.

What about ‘keeping silent in the church’ and the need for the gift of interpretation?

These two seeming prohibitions on the use of the gift of tongues in the church refer to the ‘prophetic’ use of the gift. That is, addressing the church in the manner of a prophecy. Unless one with the gift of interpretation is present then the church should not be addressed. Many people want to impose Paul’s guidelines on the prohibitions from 1 Corinthians 14 without understanding the context to which he was writing. The Corinthians were a zealous and gifted people. It was into a spiritually gifted atmosphere exploding with the life of God that Paul was writing. To impose his guidelines on a church that has little or no insight or experience into the gifts of speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues will quench the Spirit before the first steps are made. There must be room for growth and an atmosphere somewhere in the life of a church where first steps and even mistakes can be made without fear of encountering a disapproving or contemptuous attitude. This may not be the celebration service of a Sunday morning but if we are attempting to be true to the New Testament guidelines on spiritual gifts there needs to be room and an environment where gifts are celebrated and encouraged first and lovingly reviewed in an accepting atmosphere later.

(Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. 1 Cor 14:29 NIV)

It is interesting to note that in the same context of Scriptures Paul give some

interprets, so that the church may be edified. NIV

Here we see that when speaking in tongues is accompanied by the gift of interpreting tongues, it is very closely linked to the gift of prophecy. This is the second use of the gift of tongues. This understanding of the two functions of the gift of tongues is the key to understanding how to apply the scriptures regarding the gift’s appropriate use.

1 Corinthians 14:13-17

13 For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says. 14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. 15 So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind. 16 If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? 17 You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified. NIV

A central point that Paul makes repeatedly is that a chief aim we should all have when we are gathered together is to seek the mutual edification of the body of Christ. One way this can be done is when the gift of tongues is accompanied by the gift of interpretation. He encourages those who are speaking in tongues to pray that they might have the gift to interpret the tongues they are speaking as well so the church may be edified.

Summery:

1. The gift of tongues is a prayer from a person’s spirit.
2. The person does not understand what he is saying (*my mind is unfruitful*).
3. Because only the individual praying is edified when he uses tongues as a prayer language he is encouraged to pray with his understanding also, thus potentially edifying other believers to whom he may be speaking. It is important to emphasize that this is not a prohibition on speaking in tongues. In fact, it is an endorsement and encouragement to pray “*in the spirit*” (clearly a reference to speaking in tongues) and to pray with your understanding (pray in your spoken language) as well. The encouragement goes beyond just praying to singing “*in the spirit*” as well as singing “*with your understanding*”. Here it is affirmed again that the one praying in tongues is indeed giving thanks to God. Other scriptures would use similar language supporting the idea that the gift of tongues was a common part of New Testament church life. See Ephesians 5:19, 6:18, Colossians 3:16, Jude 20, and Romans 8:26. (See also J. Rodman Williams Renewal Theology Zondervan 1996 Volume II pp 218-220)

On the other hand, when someone addresses a group in tongues the accompanying gift of interpretation should accompany. Without interpretation in this context the person addressed does not understand and therefore, is not edified (i.e., cannot say “amen”).

What this paragraph does *not* say is important for our consideration as well. In our worship, even corporate worship, we are not speaking to men but to God. There may be times in a corporate setting or church meeting where speaking in tongues as a prayer language is very appropriate, even singing in tongues.

The Question of the Unlearned, Uninformed or Ungifted

1 Corinthians 14:16

...how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say "Amen" at your giving of thanks... NKJV

1 Corinthians 14:23

Therefore, if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind? NKJV

But what if other people hear you?

Well first and foremost, you are not talking to them. This sort of communication is directed to God. It is a language of worship and praise to God.

What if someone is confused or startled by hearing someone speak in a language they don't understand (tongues)?

The person unaccustomed to this practice can easily be led to an understanding of the gift and what is happening. This is not meant to open a “free-for-all” sort of “anything goes” attitude. But it is to acknowledge that there are appropriate times for us to worship “in the spirit” corporately expressing the inexpressible mysteries of God in our spirit back to Him. This can be a gloriously edifying experience for a body of believers. Just as there are times for us to pray or worship together in songs we know or pray or sing spontaneously in our own language together, there are times when we can appropriately pray or sing “in the spirit” (tongues) to God together. It is the responsibility of the leadership of the church to make appropriate explanation of what’s going on to new people when necessary. Of course, if someone is obnoxious or disruptively loud, whether in our spoken language or in tongues, we must be willing to correct this and thus keep things ‘decent and in order’.

The objection to speaking in tongues openly in a church service is often made because of a misunderstanding of the two functions of tongues. It is agreed that someone should not speak in a tongue addressing the congregation without an interpretation. This is the ‘prophetic use’ of tongues and needs to be

guidelines even apostolic injunction to ‘*eagerly desire spiritual gifts*’.

It seems clear that with all the benefits accrued one consistently utilizing the gift of tongues as well as the encouragement to desire spiritual gifts that we should earnestly pursue this gift. Seeing its close association with the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the need we all share for empowerment and personal edification as well as the apostolic exhortation to pursue spiritual gifts, surely one would do well to pursue God regarding the gift of tongues. He is honored when we seek Him and trust that He will give to those who ask and keep on asking. From these passages and many more it appears clearly that this experience was normative and should be part of our expectation and our experience for today.

How do you speak in tongues?

Many have raised questions about how someone speaks in tongues. First, you must understand that it is the Spirit of God that “gives utterance.” (Acts 2:4) In other words, the Holy Spirit gives you the words to say. You must speak them, but He is faithful to give them. Just as your mind tells you what to say when you want to speak, the Holy Spirit will also give you words to say. You must be the one to speak the words. When you speak, your voice box, tongue, lungs and mouth all work together to form words. When this happens, the very words that you want to speak come out. The same things happen when you speak in tongues. Without you having to think about it, the Holy Spirit will direct all of your speaking faculties to speak the “words of the Spirit.” You will speak, but it is He who is directing you what to say.

How does someone get the gift of tongues?

You can begin by studying and seeing the gift in the scriptures and understanding its many blessings and benefits. Then as you see it in the scriptures, believe that it is God’s desire for us to pursue spiritual gifts. By desiring and then seeking, believing, asking, praying, trusting and being ready to act as the Spirit gives us ‘utterance’ (words to speak that don’t make sense to our natural mind) we put ourselves in a position to receive. Ask trusted believers to pray with you about this gift. The following instances also show that the laying on of hands was a practice that often accompanied the baptism in the Spirit. (see Acts 8:17, 9:17, 19:6)

Is it ever appropriate to pray in tongues when I am praying over or for someone?

Certainly when you are praying for someone we should invite the presence of the Holy Spirit and any or all of His gifts. Since the complimentary gifts of tongues and interpretation are part of the list we might expect the Holy Spirit to direct their use in this setting. **But what about just praying in tongues without the accompaniment of the gift of interpretation?** Is that ever appropriate? We know that praying in tongues can rightly be understood as a prayer language and stands by itself in that capacity. It seems that there should

as the continuation of prayer and praise in the fullest dimension. It is urgent that we distinguish between tongues as a normal accompaniment of the Spirit-filled life and tongues as a gift (freely given, never possessed) of the Spirit when the community comes together. Both devotional tongues and tongues for ministry are urgently needed.” (See Renewal Theology, Zondervan 1996 Vol. II pp 396-402)

As Paul closes his thoughts on this matter he strictly adds, “do not forbid speaking in tongues” (1 Corinthians 14:39).

An aside:

The book of James mentions the tongue as the most unruly member of the body and that whoever can tame the tongue can bridle the whole body. *If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. ... But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. James 3:2, 8 NKJV*

This may help us make some connection to yielding this most unruly member of the body to God and speaking in tongues. It may be that such an experience causes us to place both our intellect (*my mind is unfruitful...*) and our tongue (that most unruly member) in subjection to the Holy Spirit. This sort of surrender may well give the Holy Spirit a position of preeminence that enhances His taming the whole body.

What might we conclude from this?

- Speaking in tongues is linked to the baptism of the Holy Spirit in most recorded accounts in the Bible.
- Speaking in tongues is beneficial for praise, prayer and personal edification.
- As a spiritual gift it is something to be desired.
- The apostle Paul often spoke in tongues.
- This was a common and shared practice in the New Testament churches.
- We should desire this gift as well.

But does speaking in tongues always accompany the experience of being baptized in the Holy Spirit?

The simple answer is no. Many people, no doubt, have had the experience of being filled with the Spirit and yet have never spoken in tongues. This may be the result of people never being taught of the availability of this gift. Or in some cases, people having been falsely instructed against such expectation. It may be because there has never been an earnest pursuit from the believer. The exhortation from *1 Corinthians 14:1* “Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy” gives us clear

accompanied by an interpretation so that the whole body can be edified. This is the high mark we should reach for in our church gatherings... seeking the edifying of the body of Christ. This is Paul’s concern again in the following verse where he contrasts speaking five understandable words with ten thousand words in a tongue: *‘that I may teach others also’*.

1 Corinthians 14:16-19

16 Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say? 17 For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified. 18 I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; 19 yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue. NKJV

But when in the course of a corporate worship service someone is praying or singing in the spirit (tongues) to God no interpretation is necessary...he is praising God and speaking mysteries with his spirit to God. *‘For you indeed give thanks well...’ v 17.*

(It is fitting to note that even in this setting we are still encouraged to pray that we might interpret...again, that the whole church might be edified.) Again, an explanation of spiritual gifts may be wise to help those who are new to such a worship atmosphere.

Most often it is not the ‘uninitiated’ or ‘unlearned’ that have the hardest time with this use of the gift of tongues. It is rather those who have been exposed to teaching that misunderstands the two uses of the gift of tongues and rigidly limits its use. It is our belief that by clarifying our position and taking the opportunity to teach on the subject as it happens that we maintain our liberty and the freedom to worship ‘in the spirit’, see the body edified and remain solidly within the guidelines of the scriptures.

Is there a difference between speaking in tongues as a prayer language to God and speaking in tongues to the church (accompanied by the gift of interpretation)?

Yes. One use of the gift is as a ‘prayer language’ to God and does not require interpretation. The other use is to address the congregation and needs to be accompanied by an interpretation of the tongues spoken (this is another spiritual gift).

1 Corinthians 14:23

So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?

Without interpretation tongues addressed to the congregation (that is the prophetic gift of tongues) are inappropriate. Here we must depend upon an interpreter to complete the process because the words are directed to the congregation.

1 Corinthians 14:5

He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.

Why would someone want to speak in tongues?

- It is a way of praising God (free from the potential pollutants of our natural mind). 1 Corinthians 14:2, 14, 17
- It is edifying to the one speaking in tongues. 1 Corinthians 14:4
- We are encouraged to seek spiritual gifts. 1 Corinthians 14:1
- Paul desired that all would speak in tongues. 1 Corinthians 14:5
- Paul himself spoke in tongues more than the prolific Corinthians. 1 Corinthians 14:18
- When the gift of tongues is accompanied by the gift of interpretation the church is edified much like the gift of prophecy. 1 Corinthians 14:5b

Who gets this gift?

It is helpful to distinguish between the two uses of the gift of speaking in tongues. As one of the nine gifts of the Spirit enumerated in 1 Corinthians 12 and accompanied by the gift of interpretation, we see the answer to the above question to be: “Those to whom the Spirit distributes the gift”

1 Corinthians 12:8-11

8 for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit,

to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit,

9 to another faith by the same Spirit,

to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit,

10 to another the working of miracles,

to another prophecy,

to another discerning of spirits,

to another different kinds of tongues,

to another the interpretation of tongues.

11 But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills. 1 Cor 12:8-11 NKJV

1 Corinthians 12:27-31

27 Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. 28 And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those

able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31 But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.

The answer to “*Do all speak in tongues?*” in the context of the prophetic gift of tongues that is to be followed by the gift of interpretation is, “No, all do not speak in tongues.” However, the gift of tongues as a prayer language deserves another look.

Another Look

For many the experience of speaking in tongues is viewed as the ‘initial evidence’ of being baptized in the Holy Spirit (classical Pentecostal view). This implies that if you haven’t spoken in tongues you haven’t been filled with the Holy Spirit. That conclusion seems to go beyond the scriptures in this matter. However, Scripture is clear about us being filled with the Spirit. It is essential for a fruitful Christian life and speaking in tongues is mentioned in the majority of the accounts recorded of those receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit in the Bible (Acts 2:5, Acts 10:44,45, Acts 19:6). And that in the remaining instance where this phenomenon was not mentioned (Acts 8:14-25) it is apparent that something observable was happening:

Acts 8:18-19

18 When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money 19 and said, “Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” NIV

The only other instance of the initial baptism in the Holy Spirit event recorded is that of Paul’s (Acts 9:17). Although not mentioned in the original account, later, in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians he heartily endorses the gift of tongues and claims to be an ardent practitioner of the gift himself (1 Corinthians 14:4,5,14,15,18, 39). He even states that he desired that everyone spoke in tongues (1 Corinthians 14:5a). In another verse he says these words, “So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues”... (1 Corinthians 14:23). This might well imply that the whole church could indeed speak in tongues.

J. Rodman Williams in his work entitled ***Renewal Theology*** states,

“...although it may be correct to say (as sometimes people do), “I do not speak in tongues because that is not my gift” in reference to body ministry, it is incorrect to add, “Therefore God does not want me to speak in tongues at all.” Such an attitude may both prevent a person from experiencing the overflow in tongues that results from being filled with the Holy Spirit as well