



THE HOLY SPIRIT
The Gift of Tongues...for Today

The Gift Giving Heart of God



THE SANCTUARY

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The Bible says that every good and perfect gift comes from the Father (James 1:17). The word “gift” is from the Greek¹ word *charisma*, which means “a free gift of grace from God.” Though they may seem unusual or even difficult at times, all of God’s gifts are wrapped in His love; with purpose and meaning that far exceeds our understanding (Isaiah 55:9; Ephesians 3:20-21). That is the essence of the Good News: “For God loved the world so much that He gave His one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).² In talking about our salvation, Paul says in Ephesians 2:8, “God saved you by His grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God.”

Everywhere you turn in Scripture you see the gift-giving heart of God. In telling the disciples about the Holy Spirit, Jesus says in Luke 12:13, “If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.” The role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer is absolutely essential. Before discussing the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and in particular the gift of tongues, it is important to understand this role. So, let’s start there.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

The New Testament designates the Holy Spirit’s relationship to the believer in three important ways—with, in, and upon.³ The first relationship of the Holy Spirit can be referred to as the with experience. This speaks of the Holy Spirit coming alongside of unbelievers to convict them of their sin and convince them that Jesus is the answer. The Holy Spirit continues this work today (John 16:7-8).

The second experience, known as the in experience refers to the Holy Spirit indwelling believers when they accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior (1 Corinthians 6:19). These first two experiences, with and in, are mentioned in John 14:16-17:

¹ Greek is the original language of the New Testament.

² All texts, unless otherwise noted, are from the NLT.

³ With, in, and upon are three distinct Greek words—*para*, *en*, and *epi*—used throughout the New Testament.

“And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth. The world cannot receive Him, because it isn’t looking for Him and doesn’t recognize Him. But you know Him, because He lives with you now and later will be in you.”

In the case of the disciples, after Jesus was crucified and resurrected, He breathed His Holy Spirit into them. This is the moment the Holy Spirit went from with to in. For us believers, we move from having the Holy Spirit with us, as a convicting and convincing agent, to in us at the moment we commit our hearts to Christ (Romans 8:9). To be “born again” is to receive the Holy Spirit: He lives in us. This is realized when the Holy Spirit baptizes the believer into the Body of Christ: “The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

But God has something more—the beautiful, empowering upon relationship of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised this work of the Holy Spirit prior to His ascension. In Acts 1:8 He said, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be My witnesses, telling people about Me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” We read about the fulfillment of this promise on The Day of Pentecost, recorded in the second chapter of Acts. There we see that how, as they prayed, the Holy Spirit initially settled upon each of them. This same Holy Spirit who was with them previously, then in them, came upon them to empower them for service.

On the Day of Pentecost, the disciples went from being a small, timid group to those who were “filled with power.” At that moment, the Church was born, their numbers began to grow rapidly, and the world was forever changed. The Spirit would flow not just in them, but now through them by touching the lives of those around them. Jesus describes this experience in John 7:38: “Anyone who believes in Me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, ‘Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.’” This act of empowering the believer is known as the Baptism with the Holy Spirit or the infilling of the Holy Spirit.

The baptism with the Holy Spirit is a separate and distinct experience. An example of this is seen when Paul came to the church in Ephesus. Apparently he found that the believers’ experience was lacking: possibly in love, joy, or zeal. He asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” This question makes no sense if the full relationship with the Holy Spirit comes simultaneously at conversion. It indicates something deeper that came when Paul laid his hands upon them in Acts 19:6: “and the Spirit came upon them.”

If Paul the Apostle would meet you and begin to share the glories of Christ with you, would he be apt to ask, “Did you receive the Spirit when you believed?” God wants your life not to just be indwelt or even filled with the Spirit. He wants your life to overflow.⁴

The purpose of this Holy Spirit fullness in the life of the believer is to both release power for ministry that goes beyond human ability and to bring greater intimacy with God. This baptism is given so that we would become fully empowered witnesses of Jesus Christ and continue His ministry here on earth. The Holy Spirit fullness comes with supernatural gifts, described with great detail in 1 Corinthians 12–14. I would encourage you to take the time, even now, to read these chapters.

Let love be your highest goal! But you should also desire the special abilities the Spirit gives—especially the ability to prophesy.

1 Corinthians 14:1

We all love gifts, especially when they are spectacular, incredibly useful, beneficial, unattainable by our own effort, and are meant to build us up and overflow to bless others. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are exactly that.⁵ In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul emphasizes that there is to be no division among believers on the grounds of the gifts because they are provided from God in all their diversity. We are reminded that God deals with us as individuals. He does not give out His gifts indiscriminately, but meets the needs and capacity of each of us.

This distinct empowering is available to all believers. The New Testament gives examples of various ways this great experience was received:

1. Suddenly, while expecting Him to come (Acts 2:1-4);
2. Instantly and unexpectedly, while listening to a sermon (Acts 10:44-46);
3. Through the laying on of the Apostles’ hands (Acts 8:14-17; 9:17; 19:6);
4. Through personal prayer and faith (Luke 11:9-13; John 7:37-39).

With regards to the Gifts of the Spirit . . . perhaps the most unusual and misunderstood is tongues. It is this gift in particular that has raised many questions and even polarized some believers. The goal of this reader is to address these questions in an effort to bring clarity and unity.

WHAT IS THE GIFT OF TONGUES?

Specifically, the gift of tongues is the supernatural ability to speak a language “existent or unknown” and not previously learned. According to Scripture, the

⁴ Smith, Chuck, *Living Water: The Power of the Holy Spirit in Your Life, The Word for Today*, Santa Ana, CA 1996, p. 97.

⁵ For more on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, see the reader *The Holy Spirit: Fruits & Gifts*, by Pastor Marty Walker, The Sanctuary, Santa Clarita, CA.

purpose of speaking in tongues is to give praise to God (Acts 2:11; 1 Corinthians 14:16). It is a gift that assists the believer to pray according to the will of God (Romans 8:26; 1 Corinthians 14:2, 14-16). Tongues is also one of the signs that Jesus said would characterize believers (Mark 16:16-19) and therefore is an evidence of the baptism with the Holy Spirit.

Speaking with tongues is a specific fulfillment of prophecies by Joel, Isaiah, and Jesus.⁶ It may also serve as a proof of the resurrection and glorification of Jesus as He promised the Holy Spirit would come afterwards: a promise fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, which included the gift of tongues. It is a blessing from God, which is nurturing and practical (1 Corinthians 14:3; Jude 20).

ARE TONGUES FOR TODAY?

There are some who believe the Holy Spirit gifts, specifically tongues, were given and exercised only during the birth of the Church, while the Apostles still lived. Their view is that these gifts simply served as a means to spread the Good News because of their confirming sign. This stems from an interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13:10, “But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away” (KJV). Those who hold this position believe that the signs and gifts were incomplete expressions of God’s working. When the canon of the Scriptures came to a conclusion (near the end of the first century), a complete “perfect” expression was in place, the gifts were no longer needed, and therefore ceased.

Many others believe that the gifts are indeed for today and are available to all until the Return of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:39). We believe that though the Scriptures are complete, they instruct us to welcome the Holy Spirit gifts and ministries in our lives, to round out our sufficiency for ministry to a needy world—through the Word preached and the Word confirmed. In fact Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 14:1 that we are to desire the spiritual gifts that the Spirit gives. Since the church is still growing, it is evident that these confirming signs are still needed.

Some see “the perfect” as referring to the full revelation given in the NT itself which when it would come to completion would do away with the “partial” forms of charismatic revelation. This of course is an impossible view, and what neither Paul nor the Corinthians could possibly have understood the text to mean. In its context, “the perfect” has to do with the end of the age and the coming of God’s kingdom. At the coming of Christ the final purpose of God’s saving work will have been reached; at that point those gifts now necessary for the building up of the church in the present age will disappear, because “the complete” will have come.”⁷

⁶ Compare Isaiah 28:11 with 1 Corinthians 14:21 and Joel 2:28-32, Mark 16:17 with Acts 2:4; 10:46; 19:6; and 1 Corinthians 14:5, 14-18, 39.

⁷ Fee, Gordon, *New International Commentary on the New Testament – 1 Corinthians*, pp. 645-646

Not until the arrival of God's kingdom, will everything be made perfect and complete. At that time, all the spiritual gifts will disappear. Because gifts are given for the building up of the body of Christ, they will no longer be needed. The body will be complete, and God's kingdom will have arrived. When Paul wrote of "the perfect," he wrote of the coming end, when we will see Christ face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12). God gives believers spiritual gifts for their lives on earth, in order to build up, serve, and strengthen fellow Christians. The spiritual gifts are for the church. In eternity, we will be made perfect and complete and will be in the very presence of God. We will no longer need the spiritual gifts, so they will come to an end.⁸

In the context of 1 Corinthians 13:10, the time when "the perfect" comes, clearly refers to the time Christ returns. Spiritual gifts then, will last among believers until that time. This means that we have a clear biblical statement that these gifts are expected to continue through the entire church age and to function for the benefit of the church until Jesus returns.⁹

There is no reasonable, biblical or historical evidence that spiritual gifts have ceased. All the spiritual gifts, including tongues, are for today.

There are some, perhaps from fear or a resistance, who have questioned whether the use of tongues today is truly of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ As Jesus Himself put it in Matthew 12:26 when the Pharisees claimed He was being led by Satan in casting out demons, ". . . if Satan is casting out Satan, he is divided and fighting against himself. His own kingdom will not survive." In truth, spiritually-balanced and biblically-based believers use the gifts of the Holy Spirit to praise God, proclaim His truth, edify the Church, and engage the enemy in battle—a gift the enemy would have no reason to use as it undermines himself.

The phenomenon of speaking in tongues described in the New Testament is not some psychological arousal of human emotions that results in strange sounds. This is a genuine, timeless work of the Holy Spirit, and a refreshing, renewing personal resource in prayer.¹¹

WHO CAN SPEAK IN TONGUES?

The Apostle Paul answers this directly in 1 Corinthians 12:30 when he asks, "Do we all speak in tongues?" This question is introduced in the Greek language in such a way that it indicates the answer "No" is expected.

⁸ Barton, Bruce, *Life Application Commentary – 1 Corinthians*, p. 192

⁹ Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology*, p. 1035

¹⁰ Historically, some have said that it is either from a "human" or "satanic" spirit.

Earlier in that same chapter Paul emphasizes this beauty of unity and diversity in these gifts and says the Holy Spirit distributes them as He wills (1 Corinthians 12:11). He alone decides. At the same time, Paul teaches that we are to be open and desire all the gifts of the Spirit, including tongues. In fact Paul says that he wishes all would speak in tongues (1 Corinthians 14:5). The instructions are clear regarding the gifts. They are not to be badges of honor or signs of spiritual superiority, as they are not “earned.” Again, they are “gifts of grace.” The simple answer to the question of who will speak in tongues is that all could but not all will.

WHAT IS THE CONTENT OF TONGUES?

Again, the gift of tongues is the supernatural ability to speak a language “existent or unknown” and not previously learned. Throughout the New Testament we see that the primary content of tongues is prayer and praise. It is a gift that is used to speak to God (1 Corinthians 14:2) and will always be glorifying to Him. On the Day of Pentecost those who witnessed the believers who spoke in tongues exclaimed that they heard about the wonderful things God had done in their own language (Acts 2:11). As Paul was instructing the church in Corinth regarding tongues, he said in 1 Corinthians 14:16: “For if you praise God only in the spirit, how can those who don’t understand you praise God along with you? How can they join you in giving thanks when they don’t understand what you are saying?”

It is also a spiritual means of rejoicing and enhanced worship (Acts 10:46; 1 Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:18-19). Tongues brings personal, spiritual edification and assists the believer to pray according to the will of God. Paul also says in 1 Corinthians 14:14 that, “. . . if I pray in tongues, my spirit is praying, but I don’t understand what I am saying. Well then, what shall I do? I will pray in the spirit, and I will also pray in words I understand. I will sing in the spirit, and I will also sing in words I understand.”

Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion.

- Ephesians 6:18 -

Since we never completely know how to pray as we ought, (Romans 8:26) we must exercise humility and faith, waiting on God and allowing the Holy Spirit to direct us. No wonder in Ephesians 6:18, Paul encourages the believers to: “Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere.” The gift of tongues is a wonderful weapon of intercessory prayer: some believers refer to it as a “prayer language” or “spiritual language,” though neither of these terms are specifically mentioned in Scripture.

11 Hayford, Jack, General Editor, *Hayford's Bible Handbook*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN 1995, p. 778.

ARE THERE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC TONGUES?

Speaking in tongues is mostly a private exercise but can be public, if interpreted. Again tongues is for prayer, praise, and self-edification. Believers in their most intimate and intercessory moments of communication with God utilize it, as the Holy Spirit moves on them. This private application may also be practiced by corporate agreement as long as there are no unbelievers or uninformed people present (1 Corinthians 14:23). Either way, the public use of tongues must be interpreted. Paul's address to the church in 1 Corinthians 14 makes this point very clear. This will be covered in greater detail later in this reader.

ARE TONGUES AND INTERPRETATION EQUAL TO PROPHECY?

Tongues and their interpretation are the same as prophesy in their function but not in their result. Both bring edification to the church in a public setting. However the result of the edification is unique; they are distinct in their message and target.

As we've studied, tongues is used in prayer and/or praise; in upward communication to God. Therefore, the appropriate interpretation (or translated meaning) of a tongue would usually be directed to God as well, (an upward interpretation) in prayer or praise.

Prophecy on the other hand is a downward communication from God. It is not just supernatural revelations of future events but more accurately "special messages, often uttered through human spokesmen, which indicate the divine will for mankind on earth and heaven."¹² Prophecy is among the gifts listed in 1 Corinthians, and according to Paul is to be especially desired (1 Corinthians 14:1). It is mentioned in some form of the word twenty times in 1 Corinthians 12–14. Paul defined it as: "strengthening others, encouraging them, and comforting them" (1 Corinthians 14:3). Prophecy, though it may confront with boldness, is meant to uplift and encourage, incite to faithful obedience and service, and to bring comfort and consolation.¹³



Tongues, when accompanied with an appropriate upward interpretation, is usually direct communication to God; whereas prophecy is direct and downward

¹² Hayford, Jack W. *op. cit.*, p. 731

¹³ Here in 1 Corinthians 12–14, it does not indicate that the gift of prophecy necessarily included foretelling the future, historically a role of the office of "Prophet" (Ephesians 4:11).

communication from God. Therefore, once again, they both edify in their function but their end-result is as unique as their directive (prophecy) and objective (tongues/ interpretation).

LET ALL BE DONE DECENTLY AND IN ORDER!

In the First letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote to bring order to a church in chaos. The Corinthians were abusing their gifts and calling attention to themselves. In their zeal, they regarded the gifts as ends in themselves. In particular, they misunderstood the proper public use of the gift of tongues and it often brought confusion to their meetings. Because these new believers misunderstood and misused the power of the Spirit; they viewed functioning in the gifts as a compulsive possession, overtaking their will (1 Corinthians 14:32). Paul responds to this problem by showing the need for the inclusion of multiple manifestations of the Spirit (Chapter 12), the need for Spirit-led motivation in those manifestations (Chapter 13), and the need for the Holy Spirit fruit of self-control in order to have orderly and edifying services (Chapter 14).

In their pride, the Corinthians saw their ability to speak in tongues as “spectacular.” At the time Paul wrote this letter it was universally accepted in antiquity that some, who were especially close to the divine, had special spiritual abilities. Usually, this was understood in terms of visions, ecstatic speech, and the like. They were often seen as “spectacular.” From the Day of Pentecost on, there were some within the Church who exercised such spiritual gifts. Many early believers saw this as the hallmark of a “spiritual” man. By comparison, the practice of simple, righteous, Christian character and virtue seemed to be dull and colorless.

Paul’s address is epoch-making and gives application to the Church even today. We would be wise to take his words to heart. Paul begins by showing that it is the Lordship of Christ that is important and that all spiritual gifts must be brought to this standard. If their use is contrary to Christ, they are not of God. Paul does not deny that the “spectacular” gifts have their place. However, he insists that the important thing is the manifestation of ethical qualities, especially love, which the presence of the Spirit in the heart of the believer makes possible (see 1 Corinthians 13:13; 14:1; Galatians 5:22).

Paul gives clear instructions that everything is to be done properly and in order.

Paul brings explicit teaching to the Corinthian church regarding their overall gatherings. His directives are so clear cut, they serve as safety guidelines for the church today and are essential to the gathering of believers everywhere. Let’s take a comprehensive look at 1 Corinthians 14:

First, Paul says that tongues should not be exercised in public unless there is an interpreter. Edification must be the prime consideration. It is right to desire spiritual gifts, but among them, Paul gives the first place to prophecy. The reason is that, it is something rather like our preaching but not identical to it. It is not the delivery of a planned sermon but the speaking of words spontaneously and directly inspired by God.

The main reason for the tongues being less important is that except when accompanied with a special gift of interpretation, what is spoken is quite unknowable to others. The person exercising the gift is actually engaged in private communication to God (14:2). By contrast the person who prophesies edifies, encourages, and comforts. To make his point, Paul affectionately talks about his next trip to see them and shows that it would be futile if he were to speak only with tongues (14:6). Speech is an effective tool of communication, but speech that is not understood is of no power at all. Speaking in tongues, which seemed to be a matter of pride to the Corinthians, then turns out to be nothing more than a "foreigner" trying to communicate (14:10-11).

Paul continues to stress the importance of understanding, edification, and participation of the whole. He mentions prayer and singing, functions especially appropriate in worship. Paul says that we will do both in the Spirit, indicating the use of tongues from the previous verses, and with understanding. In the public worship service, however, he again emphasizes that these activities be such that worshipers can enter into them wholeheartedly, with their understanding. It is a simple caution that prayers and songs are offered with sincerity and simplicity rather than emotionalism (14:14-15) and that tongues again always be interpreted, if given in public.

The attention then is turned to people who had not committed themselves to Christ, but who were interested. They weren't simply outsiders, but were not yet believers. If prayer or praise were given with tongues, they could not join in or give thanks because they would not be able to understand it (14:15-16). This is why in corporate settings tongues is not appropriate, unless it is interpreted for the benefit of those yet to come to Christ.

In summary, Paul explains that when the Church gathers for worship every member has something to contribute. However, this does not mean that all will be expected to take part in every service. Whatever is done must be for the strengthening of all (14:26). As tongues presented the most difficulty, he addresses this first. Tongues must be spoken by no more than two or three, and not simultaneously but rather each in turn. He emphasizes that each must be interpreted. If an interpreter is not present, they must remain silent (14:27-28). This beautifully illustrates that the will is involved. It cannot be the result of an irresistible impulse of the Spirit, if a person can choose to be silent.

Again, not to minimize the appropriate use of tongues, Paul turns to prophecy (14:29-31) and says it must be done in order too. As is the case with tongues, there should be no more than two or three at a service who bring a word of prophecy. The word is to be tested by those in authority. It must be in line with God's Word. Just as those with a tongue had the ability to remain silent (14:32), so it is with prophecy. This is because "God is not a God of disorder but of peace, as in all the meetings of God's holy people" (14:33).

... pursue righteous living, faithfulness, love, and peace. Enjoy the companionship of those who call on the Lord with pure hearts.

- 2 Timothy 2:22 -

Paul concludes his instructions regarding tongues and prophecy by saying: "So, my dear brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy, and don't forbid speaking in tongues. But be sure that everything is done properly and in order" (14:39-40). Both are gifts from God and their use should be encouraged, done in order, and not forbidden.

CONCLUSION

Just as the church in Corinth, we have much to take to heart from these Holy Spirit inspired words regarding the gift of tongues. These timeless truths from Scripture reach into today and call for biblically-based balance, order, and unity that would guard us from gravitating to extremes.

On the one hand, those who have been hesitant about the gift of tongues are encouraged to be open to the working of the Holy Spirit and make room for all His empowering gifts. When given proper place, exercised with love, and used for the purpose of edification, tongues is a gift that is not to be despised. It is useful in worship and is a language spoken for the express purpose of prayer and praise when exercised by spiritually-grounded, biblically-based, disciples of Christ. It will always be edifying to the believer and glorifying to God.

On the other hand, those who have held the gift of tongues as superior or the mark of a person who is truly baptized with the Holy Spirit, are encouraged to recognize its proper place among all the spiritual gifts and give room for unity in diversity. As we have seen, tongues may serve as an evidence of empowering, but the gifts are given at the discretion of the Holy Spirit not because they are demanded or expected by the believer. All could speak with tongues, if the Holy Spirit chose to give them the gift, but not all will. Yes, tongues are wonderful and unique, and we want to lead people to experience this blessing. However, we don't want to artificially manufacture them when they are not received or set them above any other gift. Our most loving and generous response is to view tongues not as a requirement to verify

one's experience, but as a grace, a gift, intended to be a regular part of daily walking in the Spirit.

We are not passive concerning the subject of ministering the fullness of the Holy Spirit or in teaching the desirability of speaking with tongues. To us, these bring a dimension intended for every believer as a daily resource in Christ (1 Corinthians 14:18). However, if the subject is approached as a dogma in which tongues is required as a proof, something of its beauty is lost and the focus of attention is misdirected.¹⁴

In everything, let us "live as citizens of heaven, conducting [ourselves] in a manner worthy of the Good News about Christ . . . standing together with one spirit and one purpose, fighting together for the faith, which is the Good News" (Philippians 1:27). Let us pursue love, be open to God gracious gifts, do all with decency and order and, most of all, extend His marvelous grace.

**Being filled with the Spirit adds new depths of love, joy, and vitality,
empowering the Christian life to thrive.**

Be God's . . . Live as Loved,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Pastor Marty Walker". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Pastor Marty Walker
The Sanctuary

¹⁴ Matsdorf, Gary, *The Baptism of the Holy Spirit, Foursquare Discussion Guide #10*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A special thank you goes to Larry Powers who added much needed direction and help. There are valuable quotes and information contained here that were generously provided by him. Our reasoning together over some quality chips and salsa brought true motivating encouragement while creating this reader.

Thanks also goes to Lucinda (Cindy) Henderson for securing her brother, Larry Powers', insight. She spent considerable time going over this material to help write and edit this reader.

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Notes

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to be a *safe place* FOR
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