

The Gifts of Grace - Tongues and Interpretation

1 Corinthians 12:7-10, "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the gift of wisdom, to another the gift of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues."

The spiritual gift of "speaking in tongues" has long been perhaps the most controversial of all the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This may well be because it is something obviously out of the ordinary, and which appears to serve no purpose as far as the natural man is concerned. By contrast, gifts like healing have an obvious value, while the 'vocal' gifts are often not perceived to be supernatural in origin. Some Christians seek to prevent tongues being used at all (and certainly not in church), whilst others elevate tongues to be the test of true spirituality. As usual Truth lies somewhere between these two extremes.

Unlike all the other Gifts of Grace, the gift of tongues appears never to have been given to anyone during the period of the Old Covenant. This is itself highly significant, since it shows that the Church was given something entirely new, a special sign, at the Pentecost following the resurrection of Jesus Christ. When the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the church.

In Mark 16:17,18 (the **Great Commission**), tongues is one of five **signs** which follow those who believe: (1) *casting out devils in the name of Jesus Christ*, (2) *speaking in new tongues*, (3) *taking up serpents*, (4) *drinking deadly things without being hurt*, (5) *healing the sick by the laying on of hands*. The manifestation of these **signs** appears to depend solely upon **believing** and then being **baptised** (Mark 16:16), which ties up with Acts 2.38-42.

Clearly, the **Great Commission** cannot merely be a promise that Christians will be good at learning foreign languages. There is no evidence that Christians (in general) find it any easier than anyone else to learn foreign languages. We all have to learn them in the usual way. Nor is it plausible that the ability to learn languages in a usual or unusual way would be regarded by anyone as a "sign" of 'belief in Christ'. The word Greek word 'kainos', translated "new" (rather than "different" or "many"), may be significant, suggesting that the utterances may not be merely new to the speaker but could be **entirely new**, for the purpose of speaking mysteries to God and man (reference 1 Corinthians 14:2).

Because the list of **signs** given in Mark 16:17-18 seem to be a curious mixture, including as it does, the ability to take up serpents and drink deadly poison, some people suppose that this justifies rejecting these verses entirely. This passage has often been regarded as not part of the original text, however, most scholars now accept the validity of it. Such an attitude is dangerous, and those who take this line often go on to reject other biblical teachings which they find hard to understand.

Note, when the believers were baptised in the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost and spoke in other tongues, they did not themselves seem surprised by what was happening to them, and Peter was confident enough to explain it all to the crowds (Acts 2). So surely this validates these verses and confirms that Jesus had in fact instructed His disciples to expect to speak in "new" (*kainos*) tongues.

Finally, we must realise that these **signs** are to follow those who **believe**, therefore, they are definitely unlimited in scope of time. Note, there is no evidence here to suggest that such **signs** will ever cease from following those who believe. If they fail, it simply reveals unbelief. Listen to Jesus' own words once again, **"These miraculous signs will accompany those who believe: They will cast out demons in my name, and they will speak in new tongues. They will be able to handle snakes with safety, and if they drink anything poisonous, it won't hurt them. They will be able to place their hands on the sick, and they will be healed."**

The gift of tongues (as revealed in Acts 2:5-11) was a new feature of the New Covenant. It was a sign that God is lifting the curse of the confusion of language released by Him at Babel (Genesis 11:7-8). God scattered the people and gave them different languages so that they would no longer be able to undertake vast projects of which He disapproves. The sign of **tongues** at Pentecost revealed that, in Christ, there is now a united people who will be able understand one another, the "first fruits" of God's task of bringing all things under Christ's authority (Ephesians 1). But note, this gift was a miracle given to the speaker rather than the hearer.

For this reason, I would place the event in Acts 2 under one of the other gifts of the Holy Spirit - the **Working of Miracles**. Why? Simply because the Holy Spirit equipped the disciples with a supernatural ability to speak their own language in different dialects (regional languages) so that all those present could understand what

they were saying and come into unity in Christ. Technically this was a miraculous “gift of languages” and not the Gift of Tongues as mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12.

So what is the **Gift of Tongues**? Firstly, the gift of tongues and the gift of interpretation of tongues are unique to the New Testament, occurring only after the Day of Pentecost. Here are some things we know about these gifts of grace:

1. The *gifts of tongues* and *interpretation of tongues* were set in the Church by God.
2. These gifts are necessary to strengthen the Church.
3. These gifts were never taken out of the Church.
4. These gifts were used down through Church history.
5. Paul taught the members of the church at Corinth to use these gifts.

However, bear in mind that **speaking in tongues** and the **Gift of Tongues** are two separate experiences.

1. Speaking in tongues is a “baptismal utterance” received when a believer is baptised in the Holy Spirit. It is primarily for personal prayer and self-edification.
2. The Gift of Tongues is speaking in tongues aloud in public worship (during a church service) - for the benefit of all.

With regards the gift of tongues there are a variety of tongues:

1. *New tongues* – Mark 16:17.
2. *Other tongues* – Acts 2:4.
3. *Tongues of men and of angels* – 1 Corinthians 13:1.

However, the Gift of Tongues always demands interpretation. **1 Corinthians 14 9, “Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air.”** (verse 13) **“For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says.”** (verse 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?”** What’s more, if no interpreter is present the speaker is to remain silent. **1 Corinthians 14 28, “If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God.”**

Let’s move on to the **Interpretation of Tongues**. The Gift of Tongues and Interpretation of Tongues are similar yet different:

- a. Neither gift is conceived in the human mind (intellect or imagination) as both these gifts originate in the Holy Spirit - your natural intellectual or creative abilities have nothing to do with this gift.
- b. Both the *gift of interpretation of tongues* and *prophecy* are in a known language. Therefore, interpretation of tongues may take the form of a prophetic word. However, whatever its usage, it must be spoken in the known language.
- c. Interpretation is not translation. A translation is the exact meaning of every word spoken. An interpretation gives the overall meaning of the ‘utterance’. Perhaps this explains why some interpretations are more lengthy than the tongues given.
- d. The Holy Spirit will adapt Himself to the vocal ability and personality of the speaker. Therefore, the speaker should be himself when interpreting a tongue. Though speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the speaker’s own nature and vocabulary are used. And because of this, a highly educated person will be prone to be more articulate than a less educated person. But whatever the vessel, the Holy Spirit will always speak to the church at its level of comfort and understanding.
- e. The benefit and edification of this gift is specific to time and place. It is not like the abiding and universal role of God’s Word. It is meant for that distinct group of people gathered at that fixed moment in time. It is truly a word in season!

What is the function of the *gift of tongues* and *interpretation of tongues*? 1 Corinthians 14 6, **“Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction?”**

Notice, both gifts bring forth (1) Revelation, (2) Knowledge, (3) Prophecy, (4) Instruction. In order to operate in any one of these four areas, tongues must be interpreted. Otherwise, as Paul has pointed out, **“What good will it be to you or anyone else.”**

The operation of these (“vocal”) **gifts of grace** have clear guidelines:

- a. No more than three gifts of tongues, with interpretation, during any one service. 1 Corinthians 14:27, ***“If anyone speaks in a tongue, two - or at the most three - should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret.”***
- b. These gifts must strengthen the church. ***“...But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.”***
- c. These gifts, when used correctly together, edify the church and are equal to prophecy. ***“I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified”*** (1 Corinthians 14:5)

To recap, the **interpretation of tongues** is the supernatural manifestation of the Spirit of God using one's vocal organs, giving utterance in one's own language, telling the meaning of the words which have just been spoken by another in tongues.

This Spiritual gift is giving 'meaning' to what has been spoken in a supernatural language. Paul says this gift helps us to profit (14:16), and God says for us to pray for this gift (14:5). However, Paul also said let someone interpret (verse 27). Therefore, there should always be someone to interpret each message given. There does not need to be a 'special one'; neither should there be any competition (1 Corinthians 14:27).

Although God may manifest this gift through any of His children, as He wills, we should prefer one who is more experienced to use this gift if he is present. The Pastor of a church is not required to wait until the "official interpreter" (if there be such a thing) is there for a message in tongues to be given and then interpreted; for God will most likely give the interpretation to the leader (1 Corinthians 14:5, 13).

Finally, in order to get yourself into a position where the Holy Spirit can manifest these gifts through you there are two basic requirements. 1) Believe, and 2) be Baptised. 1) ***Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ***, and 2) ***be Baptised in the Holy Spirit***. Believing in the Lord Jesus secures your salvation, and the Baptism of the Holy Spirit equips you for service. You need both to be effective in God's kingdom - relationship with God, and the power of God working in and through you.