

Temporary Sign Gift

## Speaking in Tongues

### Speaking with Tongues, Strange Tongues, Tongues, Speaks in a Tongue, Speaks with Other Tongues, Tongues of Men, Various Kinds of Tongues

In Lists: 1 Corinthians 12:10, 28, 30

Greek: *glossa* (γλῶσσα) "tongue," "language" (BAGD 1., 2.)

The word *glossa* has three different meanings in the New Testament:

1. The tongue as an organ of speech (Mark 7:33; Rom. 3:13; 14:11; 1 Cor 14:9, etc.)
2. Something shaped like a tongue, such as forked flames of fire (Acts 2:3)
3. A language:
  - a. Understood by the speaker (1 Cor 14:10; Rev. 5:9)
  - b. Not understood by the speaker (Acts 2:4; 10:46-47; 19:6; 1 Cor 12:10, 28; 13:1, 8; 14:1-40)

Speaking in tongues is only in Mark 16:17 and Acts and 1 Corinthians (cf. 3b above). Some teach a fourth *glossa* as an "ecstatic utterance" (emotional speaking, not in a foreign language). They seek to support this based upon Romans 8:26 ("...the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words"), 1 Corinthians 13:1 ("If I speak with the tongues of men and angels...") and 1 Corinthians 14:2 ("...one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God... no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit"). They say Acts *glossa* are "languages," but 1 Corinthians *glossa* are "ecstatic utterances."

This interpretation fails on several accounts:

1. Romans 8:26 says that the Spirit speaks, not us—and He does so with *inaudible, nonuttered, internal groanings* (Edgar, "Cessation," 384).
2. 1 Corinthians 13:1 does not teach that anyone *can* speak an angelic language, but only that *if* one could speak any earthly or heavenly language, this ability would be useless without love.
3. To "speak mysteries" (1 Cor 14:2) means the speaker and others cannot comprehend the foreign language he is using; it does not indicate that the tongue is not a known language (cf. v. 10).
4. The *only* description of tongues speaking in the NT (Acts 2:4-11) is in real human languages.
5. Paul uses *glossa* three other times (Rom. 3:13; 14:11; Phil. 2:11) outside of 1 Corinthians, each time referring to intelligible speech, so *glossa* in the NT always refers to known languages.

**Definition:** A God-given ability to speak divine revelation in a foreign language unknown by the speaker as a sign to unbelieving Jews in their language that a gifted interpreter can translate to edify the church.

#### Characteristics:

1. Unique among the spiritual gifts in the following respects:
  - a. The only spiritual gift with restricted use (except 2-3 prophets per service, 1 Cor 14:29):
    - 1) Only to be spoken by 2-3 people at a church gathering, each in turn (1 Cor 14:27)
    - 2) Only to be exercised if an interpreter is present (1 Cor 14:28), although each speaker should pray to be able to interpret his message (1 Cor 14:13). This is not a command to pray for the *gift* of interpretation (ability to understand *others'* tongues messages)!
    - 3) Only to be spoken by men in the church, never women (1 Cor 14:34-35)
  - b. The only gift in which the believer uses a language unknown to him (1 Cor 14:2, 11)
  - c. The only gift ever given to *groups* of people—on three unique occasions (Acts 2, 10, 19)
  - d. The only gift ever over-emphasized in a New Testament church (1 Cor 14)
  - e. The only gift ever said to be misused in a New Testament church (1 Cor 14).
  - f. The only gift mentioned as gradually ceasing in and of itself (1 Cor 13:8b; see below)
  - g. The only gift which is useless for edification when exercised apart from another spiritual gift, i.e., the gift of interpretation of tongues (1 Cor 14:5, 11, 13, 27, 28)
2. Audible speech (Acts 2:4, 11; 1 Cor 13:1; 14:2ff) in known languages (Acts 2:4-11)
3. Least important of all the gifts (1 Cor 12:28), especially inferior to prophecy (1 Cor 14)
4. Can be controlled by voluntarily refraining from speaking (1 Cor 14:27-28)
5. Not given to all believers (1 Cor 12:30)
6. Only understood by God, not men (1 Cor 14:2, 28), so prayer in a tongue (1 Cor 14:14) is a *negative* action rather than praise (Acts 2:11; 10:46; cf. Edgar, *Miraculous Gifts*, 181, 186-99)
7. Revelational (1 Cor 14:16) since God himself is speaking (14:21)—presumably without error!

8. There may be a twofold purpose of tongues:
  - a. Sign (Mark 16:17) to unbelievers (1 Cor 14:21-22), including Jews (Acts 2:4-11) and Gentiles (Acts 10:44-48; 19:1-7; 1 Cor 14:22-24) to authenticate the message of salvation in Christ (Heb. 2:3, 4). They authenticated God's activity in evangelistic settings (Acts 19:6).
  - b. Edification to the church when translated (1 Cor 12:7; 14:5, 12, 17, 19, 26).

**Note:** Another commonly taught purpose is for self-edification, based upon 1 Corinthians 14:4. However, self-edification is merely an accompanying circumstance or by-product of exercising this gift (or any gift!). Gifts are given not for selfish ends but for the "common good" (1 Cor 12:7).

**Scriptural Examples:** Apostles at Pentecost (Acts 2:4, 11), Gentile believers (Acts 19:46), converted disciples of John (Acts 19:6), Corinthians (1 Cor 12-14), and Paul (1 Cor 14:18)

**Temporary Nature:** In 1 Corinthians 13:8, "to be done away" (καταργηθήσονται) in the passive voice indicates that something *outside* of prophecy or knowledge would end their use. However, for tongues "to cease" (παύσονται) in the middle voice indicates that "the subject is *both* the performer and receiver of the action" (Goetchius, *The Language of the New Testament* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965], 100). This indicates that the gift of tongues would stop *itself* without any object acting upon it. The gifts of prophecy and knowledge were to be "done away" at the coming of the "complete" ("perfect"; 1 Cor 13:10), which probably refers to the relative maturity of the Body of Christ at the completion of the New Testament since they fulfilled their purpose by providing us with God's Word in written form (see pp. 16-17). However, tongues ceased by *itself* after fulfilling its purpose as a sign to Israel (Isa. 28:11, quoted in 1 Cor 14:21) and to unbelieving Gentiles (1 Cor 14:22-24).

"God was thereby giving notice to Israel that He was moving from the Jews to the Gentiles as His people. Paul explains this in detail in Romans 11, and Jesus had prophesied it in Matthew 21:33-43. In 70 AD, Israel was wiped out in fulfillment of Deuteronomy 28:63-65. They were dispersed into every nation on the face of the earth, and since that day there has been no Biblical purpose for the gift of tongues" (Radmacher, *Controversial Spiritual Gifts*, 18). Also, Hebrews 2:3-4 says "signs" (including tongues) authenticated the apostolic message.

How can one explain "speaking in tongues" today? It must not be the biblical gift of tongues but ecstatic speaking, which is often called "glossolalia" (*glossa* "tongue" + *labia* "speech"). Gibberish then and now serves not as a sign but only underscores the pagan backgrounds of the Corinthians or us. Today's phenomenon (ecstatic utterances) may be attributed to one of two sources:

1. **Self:** Highly emotional experiences for many people have caused them to suddenly burst out in a gibberish, ecstatic speech, which has often been confused with the biblical gift of tongues. Psychologists have studied this extensively as a psychological phenomenon.
2. **Satan:** The devil is a master counterfeiter, even appearing as an angel of light, if necessary (2 Cor 11:4), so the more closely ecstatic speaking resembles true tongues, the more suspect it may be! Satan is especially interested in convincing believers to rely upon any experience more than the Word of God. Ecstatic speaking is characteristic of many cults and religions, including Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and pagan African cults.

But how about "Do not forbid speaking in tongues" (1 Cor 14:39)? This applies only to the true gift of tongues—not to ecstatic utterances. Nothing in the NT prohibits us from limiting ecstatic speech.

#### **Other Viewpoints:**

1. Tongues today edifies oneself in a "private prayer language," as well as "public tongues" to communicate immediate messages from God to the church (charismatics; Wagner, 253).
2. Tongues exist today not as a gift but as a "manifestation" (result in *someone else's* life). This is a supernatural result "of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives and also in the lives of those to whom we minister." So "various tongues" means that as a tongues speaker speaks, "another's spirit is freed to communicate with God" (Gothard, "Understanding Your Spiritual Gift," 5).

## Questions on Tongues Speaking

### 1. Why can't tongues be a special prayer language for private use?

- a. The purpose of the gifts is that they might edify *others* (1 Cor 12:7; 14:26). The one mention of tongues edifying self is a *negative* action in comparison to prophecy's *positive* result of building up others (14:4). Self-edification is not to be the *goal* of exercising a spiritual gift, but simply an accompanying circumstance (cf. 1 Cor 13:5).
- b. The purpose of tongues was to serve as a sign to unbelievers (1 Cor 14:22). J. B. Phillips translates this, "That means that tongues are a sign of God's power, not for those who are unbelievers but for those who already believe" (*The New Testament in Modern English*, rev. ed., NY: Macmillan, 1972). He explains this misinterpretation thus, "This is the sole instance of the translator's departing from the accepted text. He felt bound to conclude, from the sense of the next three verses, that we have here either a slip of the pen on the part of Paul or, more probably, a copyist's error" (Phillips, 552). Phillips fails to mention, however, that *not one* of the thousands of NT manuscripts read with his own invented reading! Nor can an error by Paul be reconciled with an inerrant text. Despite Paul's clear teaching that tongues serve as a sign to *unbelievers*, most charismatics today see this as a sign to them as *believers* that God is at work in their lives. Examples of tongues usage include both outside (Acts 2, 10, 10) and inside the assembly (1 Cor 14), but the clearly stated purpose is as a sign to unbelievers. One could infer from this that God only grants a tongues utterance to an assembly when an unbeliever is present (14:23), but even in this case, it should be translated so that believers could be edified (14: 5, 12, 17, 19, 26).
- c. One who speaks in a tongue does so "to God" (1 Cor 14:2), but Paul clearly says that prayer with understanding is superior to prayer in a tongue because prayer without understanding by comparison is a *negative* action (1 Cor 14:14-15).
- d. The gift of tongues was not given to all (1 Cor 12:30), so why would God give a unique prayer language to only *some* of His children? While some may ask the same question ("Why did only some receive it?") of any of the gifts, prayer is a privilege shared by all.
- e. God's provision of the gift of interpretation of tongues (1 Cor 12:30) shows that tongues were not for devotional use. Tongues should never be used without interpretation (14:26-28), which indicates that private use is out of character with the purpose of the gift. Even though a tongues speaker should seek to understand what he is saying (14:13), this person has no guarantee that he understands. While very few who claim such a "private prayer language" seek to understand their utterances, Paul noted that prayer with understanding is better (1 Cor 14:19).
- f. The use of every gift is public, not private. In every case where gifts were used, the body was assembled. But how can we understand 1 Corinthians 14:28 in this respect: "If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God"? Is this not a private use? No, for every time in Scripture that tongues are spoken, they are uttered within the context of a group—even the speaking of 1 Corinthians 14:28 takes place "in the church" (cf. 14:19, which is not contrasted with private use).
- g. Paul said that he spoke in tongues more than the Corinthians (14:18). Did this not indicate a private usage? No, for Paul never stated the circumstances or location of this practice. He then notes, "but in the church," intelligible speech is better than unintelligible speech (v. 19). Is this not a comparison between private and public tongues? No, he instead contrasts tongues used outside of the assembly as a sign to unbelievers (vv. 20f.) with tongues needing interpretation in the assembly. In both cases, tongues are public.

## 2. Why isn't speaking in tongues proof that one has been baptized with the Spirit?

- Receiving at least *one* spiritual gift is evidence that one has received Christ (i.e., been baptized with the Spirit; 1 Cor 12:7, 11, 18), but nowhere does the Bible say this gift must be tongues. The "gift" of Acts 2:38 is not tongues but the Spirit himself.
- All Christians are baptized with the Spirit (1 Cor 12:13), but not all believers are to speak in tongues (1 Cor 12:30); therefore, a connection between the two cannot be maintained.
- Scripture records the salvation experience of dozens of individuals; however, salvation resulted in tongues on only two accounts (Acts 10, 19).

## 3. Why shouldn't I seek the gift of tongues?

- You shouldn't seek *any* spiritual gift since the Holy Spirit is the one who decides which gift each believer should possess (1 Cor 12:7, 11, 18).
- Even if you *were* to seek a gift, tongues would not be that gift since it is the least important of the spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:28).
- Only five passages in the NT mention tongues speaking (Mark 16:17; Acts 2:4-11; 10:46; 19:6; 1 Cor 12-14). None of these passages indicate that the speakers ever sought the gift. In fact, Peter and the saved Jews were amazed that it happened (Acts 10:45). Therefore, the biblical pattern is not to seek the gift—except in the case of the Corinthians, who were rebuked for it (1 Cor 14:1-2, 39).

## 4. Should the use of the gift of tongues in Acts be the pattern for the church today?

- The problem with this question is that it assumes a single pattern of tongues speaking in Acts, which the following chart shows did not exist. It was bestowed at differing times with salvation and to separate groups. The only common element is that each occurrence served as a sign to Jews.
- Interpretive problems often arise when establishing doctrinal beliefs based only on the Book of Acts. A proper understanding of Acts can only be obtained when one recognizes that it is a transitional book and, therefore, not intended to set norms for the post-apostolic age. This is especially true regarding speaking in tongues in Acts:

Text	Speakers	Audience	Time	Purpose
2:1-4	Apostles+	Unsaved Jews at Pentecost	After salvation	Validate for Jews the fulfillment of Joel 2
8:14-17	Samaritans	Saved Jews doubting God's plan (Peter+)	After salvation	Validate for Jews God's acceptance of Samaritans
10:44-47	Gentiles (Cornelius+)	Saved Jews doubting God's plan (Peter+)	At salvation	Validate for Jews God's acceptance of Gentiles
19:1-7	OT believers in Messiah	Jews needing gospel message confirmed	At salvation	Validate for Jews God's message through Paul

Chart adapted from Stanley Toussaint, "Acts," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 2:408

Notice that in each case above tongues were given on unique occasions to validate God's work for Jews in attendance. As far as we know, no situations when the biblical gift of tongues was given to groups of believers ever happened again. Thus, no norm can be established from Acts.

## Tongues versus Prophecy

The Apostle Paul felt that one of the best ways to teach the proper emphasis regarding the gift of tongues was to contrast tongues with prophecy. Most of 1 Corinthians 14 is devoted to showing the superiority of prophecy over tongues. The following chart and other relevant passages summarize Paul's teaching.

	<b>Tongues</b>	<b>Prophecy</b>
<b>Value</b>	Inferior (14:5a)	Superior (14:1)
<b>Relation to Other Gifts</b>	The least important gift (12:28)	The second most important gift (12:28)
<b>Language Used</b>	Foreign (14:10)	Vernacular (14:19)
<b>Corollary Gift</b>	Interpretation of tongues (12:30; 14:27-28)	Discerning of spirits (12:10; 14:29)
<b>Speaker's Knowledge of Language</b>	Unknown: "utters mysteries with his spirit...my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful" (14:2b, 14)	Known: "pray with my spirit [and] with my mind" (14:15, 19)
<b>Value (without Interpretation)</b>	Harmful: people cannot understand and thus are not edified (14:16-17, 23, 28)	Great: people can understand and thus are edified (14:5b, 24-25)
<b>Edification (without Interpretation)</b>	Self only (14:4a; cf. 10:24; 12:7, 11)	Entire church (14:4b)
<b>Direction of Speech</b>	To God (14:2)	To men (14:3)
<b>Result in Others</b>	Revelation, knowledge, prophecy, word of instruction (14:6)	Strengthening, encouragement, and comfort (14:3b)
<b>Type of Communication</b>	Speaking (14:6), prayer (14:14), praise (14:16), singing? (14:15b)	Foretelling the future, "forthtelling" or declaring doctrinal truth (14:19)
<b>Purpose</b>	Sign to unbelieving Jews (14:21-22a)	Message to believers (14:22b)
<b>Limitations</b>	Two or three tongues messages in each service (14:27a), speak in turn (14:27b), someone must interpret (14:27c-28)	Two or three prophetic messages in each service (14:29a), speak in turn (14:30-31), weigh what is said (14:29b, 32)
<b>Exhortation</b>	Negative: Do not forbid tongues (14:39b)	Positive: Be eager to prophesy (14:39a)
<b>Agent of Cessation</b>	Self: middle voice (13:8b)	Someone other than self: passive voice (13:8a)