

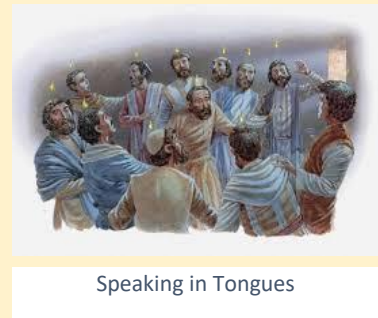
Study Guide #14: The Gift of Tongues

Introduction

The Pentecostal and charismatic movements within Christianity, although distinguished from each other, share an emphasis on the importance and continuation of the spiritual gifts in the Church. Not every charismatic Christian speaks in tongues, but the movement known as *glossolalia* has spread far beyond the Pentecostal movement itself, even affecting some Catholic congregations. What is the spiritual gift of tongues? Is the current phenomena of glossolalia Biblical? We discuss these issues in this Study Guide.

Question #1: What is the gift of tongues?

Answer: The modern era of Christian speaking in tongues began near the beginning of the 20th century with the rise of the Pentecostal movement. It's called *glossolalia*, which is derived from 2 Greek words meaning “tongues” and “speaking.” Pentecostalism emphasizes the baptism of the Holy Spirit and His spiritual gifts to the Church, especially the gift of tongues. Pentecostalism represents the most significant rejection of the cessation view of the sign gifts. [See Explorer II, Study Guide #13 for a discussion of cessationism.]



Modern glossolalia teaches that speaking in tongues is a special prayer language given to benefit the believer and is *the* sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Since the 1960s, glossolalia has spread across many parts of Christianity. This emphasis on spiritual gifts led to an emphasis on ecstatic forms of worship in which believers exhibit extraordinary enthusiasm and emotions. This broader movement is known as the charismatic movement, the word “charismatic” coming from the Greek word “charismata,” meaning “grace, kindness, or favor.” The charismatic movement is an integral part of the ecumenical movement, which deemphasizes doctrinal differences in an effort to bring greater unity among the various Christians.

Question #2: Is glossolalia the sign that one has been baptized by the Holy Spirit?

Answer: The apostle Paul wrote that the Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts “**to each one individually as He wills**” (I Corinthians 12:11, NKJV). Then he added in verse 30, “**Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?**” (NKJV). It's plain to see that not every believer possesses any one particular gift. Instead, the Bible teaches that *everyone* who has received the Holy Spirit will reflect the *fruit* of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). As we discussed in Explorer II, Study Guide #10, Question #1, the Holy Spirit is associated with water baptism. Therefore, *that* is the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Question #3: Is glossolalia really a special prayer language?

Answer: Many linguists have made a systematic study of this phenomena among Christians and non-Christians alike. Their findings include the conclusion that (1) there's no linguistic or structural differences between Christian and non-Christian glossolalia; and (2) glossolalia can be learned. *First*, it's axiomatic that the Holy Spirit would never give the same spiritual gift to non-Christians like shamans and spirit mediums. *Second*, if glossolalia can be taught and learned, that suggests it's not a supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit because all spiritual gifts are initially given by the Holy Spirit. Some of them can be improved by exercising them, but no supernatural gift can be learned. *Third*, the Scriptures tell us to **"Test all things"** (I Thessalonians 5:21, NKJV), but attempts to test this "gift" have failed. For example, one experiment was conducted in which several Christians claiming to have the gift of interpretation of tongues were each separately asked to interpret the meaning of a recorded message in tongues. No single interpretation came close to being the same. When told that news, they just replied that God had given different messages through the one message. That means that glossolalia can't be any language at all. It also means there's no way to test glossolalia. *Finally*, no spiritual gift is given for the benefit of the individual receiving the gift, but for **"the profit of all"** (I Corinthians 12:7, NKJV). For all of these reasons, we reject the modern speaking in tongues as being a prayer language.

Question #4: How should we understand I Corinthians 13:1, where Paul seems to say that he spoke the language of angels?

Answer: Virtually all Christians acknowledge that the gift of tongues in Acts 2 is the supernatural ability to speak a foreign language that the speaker had never studied or learned—a gift that helped spread the



An Angel

gospel to numerous different language groups of people. The primary point of contention has been the gift of tongues in I Corinthians 14. Some have understood tongues to be a special prayer language on the basis of I Corinthians 13:1, which states, **"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels..."** (NKJV). Paul isn't saying that he actually spoke the language of angels. *First*, only the apocryphal *Testament of Job* refers to a language of angels, and it uses the word from which the English word "dialect" is derived rather than the normal word "glossa," which is used throughout I Corinthians 12-14 as well as in the book of Acts. *Second*, the word **"Though"** means "If," and the verb for

"speak" is in the mood that makes it a hypothetical statement. Thus, Paul didn't actually say that he spoke the language of angels.

Question #5: Why is there so much confusion about what Paul meant in I Corinthians 14?

Answer: Unfortunately, some translations of the Bible make it sound like the gift of tongues was something new and strange in that chapter. For example, the King James' Version adds the word "unknown" preceding the word "tongue" in verses 2, 4, 14, 19, and 27. The Today's English Version adds the word "strange" before the word "tongue" or "tongues." The New English Bible uses the words "ecstasy" and "ecstatic" in various parts of the chapter. Finally, the New Revised Standard Version implies the existence of 2 different spiritual gifts by translating "glossa" as "language(s)" in Acts 2 and as "tongue(s)" in I Corinthians 14.

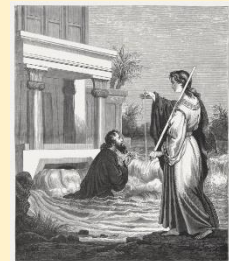
Therefore, the believer must ignore words not in the original text and allow the passage to interpret itself by comparing Scripture with Scripture.

Question #6: Does I Corinthians 14:13 mean that the tongues-speaker himself doesn't know what he's saying?

Answer: That verse reads, “**Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret**” (NKJV). But verse 4 says that a tongue-speaker edifies himself, and verse 5 says that edification requires understanding of what is said. Therefore, the speaker must know what he's saying. Verse 13, then, must mean that he's not always able to translate word-for-word what he has said—a problem that many speakers of foreign languages have when their mind is set on a foreign language. Speaking a foreign language is one thing; translating it is another.

Question #7: If I Corinthians 14:14-16 means that the tongues-speaker is in the spirit, not the mind, isn't he in a trance-like state like a prophet who's in vision?

Answer: No. *First*, Paul's regulations (especially in vv. 27-28) presuppose the tongues-speaker's ability to control the use of his gift. So this isn't a trance-like state. *Second*, the word “**therefore**” in verse 13 ties it to the previous verses referring to normal human language (vv. 10-12), and the word “**for**” in verse 14 ties it to verse 13. This indicates that speaking in tongues is a normal human language, which in turn implies that the speaker is in control of himself.



A Prophet in Vision

So what does Paul mean in verses 14-16? Let's look at it here:

¹⁴For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. ¹⁵What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding. ¹⁶Otherwise, 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?

First, “**my spirit**” in verse 14 is equivalent to “**the spirit**” in verse 15. *Second*, note that verse 16 makes it clear that the understanding or lack of understanding is on the part of the listeners, not the speaker. Therefore, we conclude that by “**my spirit**” or “**the spirit**,” Paul is referring to the mind of the speaker. Therefore, none of the evidence in these verses points to something that the speaker doesn't understand.

Question #8: What does Paul mean in I Corinthians 14:2 when he declared that “he who speaks in a tongue...speaks in mysteries”?

Answer: The Greek word for “**mysteries**” refers to hidden truths that have now been made known in the New Testament to God's people (Romans 11:25; 16:25-26; Ephesians 1:9; 3:3-4; Colossians 1:26). Therefore, the person who speaks mysteries is speaking plainly. This means that the reason others could not understand him is that they didn't know the foreign human language he was speaking in. This is also

the reason the apostle states in verse 2 that the speaker only talks to God, because only God knows all human languages. Certainly, God doesn't need anyone to explain those mysteries to Him.

Question #9: Is there any other evidence in I Corinthians 14 that shows that tongues-speaking in this chapter is in a human foreign language?

Answer: Yes. There are at least 3 other pieces of good evidence to demonstrate that Paul is here talking about believers speaking in human foreign languages that other church members couldn't understand:

First, verse 6 informs us that tongues only profits others if it brings a **“revelation,” “knowledge,” “prophesying,”** or **“teaching.”** This means that it must be spoken so that other people can understand it. This evidence conflicts with the popular view that glossolalia is a personal prayer language intended to bless the speaker.

Second, verses 10-11 use the Greek word “phone” (**“language”**), from which our English word “phonics” is derived, in a context which clearly describes an ordinary human language.



Finally, verse 21 quotes Isaiah 28:11, where it's said that God will use the Assyrians to speak to His people since they had not listened to their own prophets. Then I Corinthians 14:22 says that **“Therefore tongues are for a sign...”** (NKJV). Obviously, the Assyrians' tongues (“glossa,” v. 21) was their own native language, which was a foreign language to the Hebrew people. By connecting the Assyrians' language with Christian speaking in tongues, we know that the latter was also a real human language.

Question #10: How would you summarize the findings in this Study Guide?

Answer: We can summarize it in the following 5 major points:

- The real “baptism of the Holy Spirit” is the gift of the Holy Spirit who comes into an intimate relationship with the believer at or around the latter's *water* baptism.
- Linguistic studies have demonstrated that glossolalia occurs among Christians *and* non-Christians alike *and* that there's no real difference between the phenomena. Structurally, it's not a language at all.
- Confusion about tongues-speaking in I Corinthians 14 is particularly amplified by various Bible translations which make it seem that Paul is talking about a different gift there than in the book of Acts. However, those translations are misleading by adding words not present in the original.
- The evidence from I Corinthians 14 itself illustrates that the tongues-speakers were in full self-control and knew themselves what they were saying.
- There's abundant evidence in I Corinthians 14 itself that leads to the logical conclusion that the gift of tongues in that chapter is the same as it was in the book of Acts—ordinary human languages which most of the other church members simply didn't know.