

*Tongues
and the
Gifts of God*

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Tongues and the Gifts of God

There are many views on the Gift of Tongues and its role in Christian practice today. At one end of the scale, some conservative Christians claim that the gift of Tongues ended long ago and that those who practice it today are deceived by Satan and serve him instead of Christ. At the other extreme, the radical charismatics believe that all true Christians must speak in tongues. The truth—as revealed in God’s Word—is that both of these two views are wrong.

Before we go any further, let us state what the Gift of Tongues really is: talking in a God-given language unknown to the speaker. The Bible quotes given throughout this article confirm this definition. There are four uses for the gift of Tongues shown in the Bible: to evangelize foreigners in their own language; to communicate with believers (which requires interpretation); as a sign to unbelievers and to pray to God privately.

The first passage addressing the issue of tongues is in Acts 2:1-18. Here we see the gift of tongues¹ being used to evangelize people from diverse countries and languages:

And when the days to Pentecost were fulfilled, they were all assembled as one. And suddenly there was a sound from heaven, like a mighty wind, and the whole house in which they were sitting was filled by it.

And there appeared to them tongues like fire that divided, and they sat on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and they proceeded to speak in languages, whatever language the Spirit gave them to speak.

¹ In the Aramaic Peshitta, this is called the Gift of Languages, which is a more accurate and less controversial description of this Gift of the Spirit. As our translation is based on the Aramaic, it appears as *languages* in these quotations.

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There were men dwelling in Jerusalem then who feared God, Judeans from all nations under heaven. And when that noise occurred, the entire populace gathered, and was agitated, because every man of them heard them speaking in their own languages.

Then they were all astonished and marvelled, and they were saying, each to the other, “Behold, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? So how are we hearing, every man in his language in which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and those dwelling between the Rivers, Judeans and Cappadocians, and those who are from the regions of Pontus and Asia, and from the regions of the Phrygians and Pamphylia, and of Egypt and of the regions of Libya which are near Cyrene, and those who came from Rome; Judeans and proselytes, and those from Crete and Arabia. Behold, we are hearing some of them speaking in our own languages of the wonders of God.”

So they were all astonished and bewildered as they were saying one to another, “What is occurring?” But others were mocking them and they were saying, “They have drunk new wine and have become drunk.”

Then Simon Peter arose with the eleven apostles, and he lifted up his voice and said to them, “Men, Judeans and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and pay attention to my words. For these are not drunk, as you are thinking, for behold, it is only the third hour now. Instead, this is what was spoken by Joel the prophet:

‘It will be done in the last days,’ says God. ‘I will pour out My Spirit on everyone. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy, and your young men will see visions and your elders will dream dreams. And upon My menservants and upon My maidservants I will pour My

Spirit in those days; and they will prophesy.” Acts 2:1
to 18

This occurrence was unique in several respects: it was the first time God had poured His Spirit into Jesus’ followers and it is the first recorded instance where all of the brethren spoke in tongues.² Furthermore, when the many foreign pilgrims arrived, each of them heard at least one disciple speak in their own language.

Some people claim that all of the pilgrims simultaneously understood everything that was spoken in their own language. But if this was so, it would mean that the miracle was in the hearing, not in the speaking (i.e. Tongues). With such a hearing miracle there would be no confusion about what was spoken, nor any need for more than one disciple to speak. Instead, we find that some of those present, most likely the local Judeans, were not able to understand much of what was spoken as most of it was in foreign languages that they did not know. And as they knew that those speaking were “ignorant” Galileans, they assumed that they were so drunk that they could not speak properly. The foreigners knew better, as each of them heard the disciples praising God in their own dialect. And as travellers, they heard other dialects that they were familiar with being spoken by the disciples too!

As Peter makes clear, these disciples were in fact prophesying to the various pilgrims present. Peter, also prophesying, speaks to the multitude in the local dialect that almost everyone present can understand.

Pentecostals like to point out that all of the brethren present on that day did speak in tongues. But we find that the “normal” gift of tongues, unlike this unique Pentecost event, is **not** for all of the brethren. Paul says in this passage:

² We also have Acts chapter 10, where we are told that ALL of the gentiles who believed also spoke in tongues, and again in Acts chapter 19, where the 12 brethren who Paul laid hands on also spoke in tongues (languages) and prophesied when the Holy Spirit came upon them.

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Now there are diversities of gifts, but there is One Spirit. There are diversities of services, but there is one Lord Jah. And there are diversities of miracles, but there is One God who works them all in everyone.

But to each person the revelation of the Spirit is given as it helps him: for a word of wisdom is given to him through the Spirit, but to another the word of knowledge through the Spirit in him, to another faith by the Spirit in him, to another the gift of healing by the Spirit in him, but to another miracles, then to another prophecy, then to another discerning of spirits, then to another different kinds of languages, then to another the interpretation of languages.

But that One Spirit does all of these, and distributes to every person as He wills. 1 Corinthians 12:4 to 11

And if anyone wishes to argue, Paul makes it crystal clear that not all Christians have to speak in tongues:

For you are the body of the Anointed, and members in your places. And God has established in His congregation: first apostles, after them prophets, after them teachers, after them workers of miracles, after them gifts of healing, helpers, leaders, and various languages.

Are they all apostles? Are they all prophets? Are they all teachers? Are they all workers of miracles? Do they all have gifts of healings? Do they all speak with languages? Do they all interpret? 1 Corinthians 12:27 to 30

Just as we are not all prophets, teachers or miracle-workers, we do not all speak with tongues. And more than this, the passage reveals

that the gift of tongues, though conspicuous, is not the greatest gift of the spirit.

Paul also gives the context within which all of the Gifts of the Spirit are given and are to work:

For by one Spirit we were all immersed into one body; whether Judeans or Aramaeans, whether servants or children of the free; and we have all been caused to drink the One Spirit. For the body is not one member but many.

Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not part of the body," is it therefore not part of the body? And if the ear should come and say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not part of the body," is it therefore not part of the body?

If the entire body were an eye, where would the hearing be? And if it was all hearing, how would there be smelling?

But now God has set each member, every one of them, in the body just as He chooses. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now there are many members, yet one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, "You are not necessary to me."; nor can the head say to the feet, "You are not necessary to me." But to the contrary, those members which seem weak are more necessary. 1 Corinthians 12:13-22

Please grasp this. God has deliberately given each of us different gifts, and for us to function effectively as the Body of Christ on earth, we must each embrace and fulfil our function. And all that we desire and do must be within the embrace of God's Love:

But if you are zealous for greater gifts, I will show you a better way.

If I speak with every language of men and of envoys, but have no love in me, I am like clanging brass or a noisy cymbal. And if there are prophecies given through me, and I understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith in me, so that I can remove mountains, but have no love in me, I am nothing.

And if I give everything that I have to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but have no love in me, I will gain nothing. Love is patient and its spirit is kind; love does not envy; love does not get upset and is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, nor does it seek its own, nor is it provoked, nor does it consider evil.

Love does not rejoice in evil, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes and endures all things. Love never fails. But prophecies will cease; and languages will be silenced; and knowledge will become nothing.

For we know a little of much and we prophesy a little of much. But when perfection comes, then that little part will be as nothing.

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I was led as a child, and I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I ceased these childish things. For now it is like we see in a mirror, but then face to face. Now I know a little of much, but then I will know just as I am known.

And now continue in these three: faith, hope and love; but the greatest of these is love. Pursue love, and be zealous for spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. 1 Corinthians 12:31 to 14:1.

None the less, the Bible does show that tongues are valuable. Indeed, in 1 Corinthians 14:5 Paul says he would be delighted if all could speak in tongues. But what is the value of tongues? Is it the same as what occurred on the Day of Pentecost in Acts where

tongues were used to prophesy directly to foreigners in their own language? The Bible shows us that the purpose of the gift is not always the same as that unique Pentecost event:

For he who speaks in languages does not speak to men but to God, for no person understands what he says; however, by the spirit he speaks mysteries. But he who prophesies speaks edification and encouragement and comfort to men. He who speaks in languages builds himself up, but he who prophesies builds up the congregation. 1 Corinthians 14:2 to 4

So we see that the “normal” gift of tongues is predominantly intended to be used in private prayer between a person and God. It is not understood by other people. It is a gift that needs humility and the Spirit of God to function properly. Without God’s Spirit there is no gift, and without humility we would not allow God’s Spirit to speak through us. It is a beautiful gift that God uses to strengthen our own personal faith. But a Christian is not required to speak in tongues to be spiritual. Each person has a particular gift that God has given them. Using their gift, under the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit, will strengthen their faith and usually strengthen their brethren too.

As an example, prophecy is a greater gift than tongues as it helps and strengthens others. Paul expands this concept in the next few verses:

Now I wish that all of you may speak in languages, but even more that you may prophesy; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in languages, unless he interprets, for if he interprets he builds up the congregation.

And now, my brethren, if I come to you and I speak to you in languages, how will I benefit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching? For even soulless things, like a flute or harp which make sounds, if they do not make a distinction between one tone and another, how will it be known what is played or what is harped? And if the horn makes an indistinguishable sound, who will be prepared for battle?

So you also, if you say words in languages, and you are not interpreting, how will anything you say be understood? It will be as if you are speaking into the air.

Behold, there are many kinds of languages in the world, and there is not one of them without sound. But if I do not know the meaning of the sounds, I am a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks is a foreigner to me.

Even so, since you are also zealous for the gifts of the Spirit, seek to abound for the building up of the congregation. So he who speaks in languages, let him pray that he interprets. For if I pray in languages, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful.

Therefore, what will I do? I will pray with my spirit, and I will also pray with my understanding. I will sing with my spirit, and I will also sing with my understanding. Otherwise, if you bless in the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the unlearned say "Amen" for your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you said? For you have blessed well, but your neighbour is not built up.

I thank God that I speak in languages more than all of you; but in the congregation I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others

also, than ten thousand words in languages. 1
Corinthians 14:5 to 19

Paul then shows that tongues (languages) also have a place in congregation meetings, but it is a carefully controlled position. Tongues can be used as a sign to unbelievers, and must always be interpreted. Moreover, only two or three messages in tongues will be allowed. God does not authorise communal “singing in the Spirit” such as occurs in many charismatic churches.

My brethren, do not be children in your understanding; however, to evil be infants, and in your understanding be fully mature.

In the Instructions it is written: “‘With foreign speech and another language I will speak to this people; and in neither of these ways will they hear Me,’” says Jehovah.’ Therefore languages are established for a sign, not for believers but for those who do not believe; but prophecy is not for unbelievers but for those who believe.

However, if it happens that the whole congregation assembles together, and they all speak in languages, and those who are uninformed or unbelievers come in, will they not say to themselves that they have gone insane? But if all of you prophesy, and an uninformed person or an unbeliever comes in, they are sought out by all, and they are reprovved by all of you. And the secrets of the heart are revealed; and then he will fall on his face, and he will worship God and say that God is truly in you.

Therefore I say to you, my brethren: Whenever you gather together, whoever among you has a psalm, let him speak; and whoever has a teaching, whoever has a revelation, whoever has a language, and whoever has an interpretation, let all these things be done to build you up. And if anyone speaks in languages, let two speak and at

the most three; let each one speak, and let one interpret. But if there is no interpreter, let him be silent in the congregation, for he who speaks in languages speaks only to himself and to God.

And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others discern. And if something is revealed to another who sits by, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, that every person may teach and every person may be comforted. For the spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet. Because God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as it is in all the congregations of the saints. 1 Corinthians 14:20 to 33

In verse 32, Paul shows us that God does not take away our self-control even when he is speaking through us, either in tongues, interpretation, knowledge or prophecy. We can reassert our control at any moment. It is not like the demonic possession which occurs in dervishes or other pagan religions where the person's self-control is ripped apart. God loves us and always respects our freedom to choose to participate with Him. "Slaying in the Spirit" and similar practices do not comply with God's Word nor His Way and therefore must not be accepted in Christian assemblies.

As in most other things, Satan does indeed have his counterfeit of tongues. In the authors' experience, God's gift of tongues came as a warmth that descended from above, and filled us from our head to our toes with peace, joy and a deeper love for God and his Word. It did not require an "initiation" ceremony where you chant meaningless sounds surrounded by others who encourage you to duplicate their noises. Those who "learn to speak in tongues" in this way frequently say that the power comes up through the ground into them in an overwhelming manner—much like the Kundalini power of Hinduism. One can only have grave doubts about the source of their "gift". These people also generally claim that God's commandments have been "done away" by Christ and they are free

to do what they like. Compare this attitude with Matthew 5:17 to 20, 1 Peter 2:11 to 16 and Revelation 14:12. This dangerous anti-law teaching is dealt with fully in our *Free to Obey God* article.

It is also important to see in 1 Cor 14:26, quoted above, that God, through Paul, wants us to have a vibrant, but controlled, creativity in our congregations. God Himself will give songs, revelations, etc to numerous members of the assembly to bring to the meetings. He does this to strengthen the faith of the entire congregation and to ensure that we remember that He is the head of the church, not any man.

Has the Gift of Tongues Ceased?

These scriptures clearly show the importance of God's Gifts in the life of every Christian. In particular, Paul shows us how much we need prophecy and the interpretation of tongues in our assemblies and how useful prayer in the Spirit (tongues) can be in our personal relationship with God. Rejecting these gifts creates a powerless Christianity (2 Timothy 3:5). Indeed, God actually demands that we do not forbid our brethren from exercising the gifts He gives us:

If any one of you thinks that he is a prophet or he is of the Spirit, let him know that these things which I write to you are the commandments of our Lord. But if anyone will not know, let him not know.

Therefore, my brethren, be zealous to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in languages. But let everything be done decently and with order. 1 Corinthians 14:37 to 40

The idea that Tongues has ceased is based on the misinterpretation of a passage that we quoted earlier:

Love never fails. But prophecies will cease; and languages will be silenced; and knowledge will become nothing. For we know a little of much and we prophesy a little of much. But when perfection comes, then that little part will be as nothing.

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I was led as a child, and I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I ceased these childish things. For now it is like we see in a mirror, but then face to face. Now I know a little of much, but then I will know just as I am known. 1 Corinthians 13:8 to 12

The issue here is what is the “perfection” which will come and bring these things to an end?

Those who claim that these gifts have been “done away” say that the “perfection” is the written Word of God. They say that because we have the completed Scriptures, this means that we no longer need prophecy. And therefore tongues and interpretation are no longer needed as they are an indirect method of prophecy. And if they were consistent, they must also mean that knowledge has been “done away with” too. (Though it is not knowledge in the sense of knowing anything that will one day be done away with, but the gift of knowledge, meaning that God’s Holy Spirit directly imparts information or understanding to a believer about certain things that affect their congregation and/or those around them.)

Our belief is that the “perfection” refers to Jesus (Jeshua) and the events following His Return. The Bible is designed to lead us to Jeshua, not to replace Him. Through the Bible and the indwelling of God’s Spirit, we know in part, like seeing Jeshua in a mirror. But it is only when we have been resurrected at the last trumpet that we will know Him just as He knows us. (1 John 3:2, Hebrew 11:40)

One also needs to understand that the Aramaic word translated in the above passage as “perfection” is **גְּמֵירוּתָא** *gmeerootha* which means “to be complete, made perfect”. The Greek manuscripts have

τέλειος *teleios*, with the same meaning. The completion of our begettal by the Holy Spirit is our transformation, or birth, as perfected children of the one True God and brothers and sisters to our Lord Jeshua the Anointed at the first resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:52, 1 Thessalonians 4:16, Revelation 20:4 to 6). This event is one aspect of the Return of Jeshua.

Paul does not restrict the sign of tongues to the unbelieving Jews of his day, so it is just as applicable to the unbelieving Jews of today. Paul also says nothing to restrict the use of tongues as a sign to Jews only. Instead he applies them as a sign to all unbelievers. As there are still uninformed and unbelievers today, both Jews and Gentiles, there is no reason to assume that tongues have ceased yet.

The argument to support the ongoing gift of prophecy can be easily supported from Scripture. When Peter quotes Joel it is clear that what happened at Pentecost was only the beginning of the fulfilment of this prophecy:

‘It will be done in the last days,’ says God. ‘I will pour out My Spirit on everyone. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy, and your young men will see visions and your elders will dream dreams. And upon My menservants and upon My maidservants I will pour My Spirit in those days; and they will prophesy.’ Acts 2:17 to 18

We have been in the “last days” ever since then, and with each passing year we draw closer to the time of our Messiah’s Return and the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Prophecy is not limited to the writing of the Bible. There are many references to prophets in the Bible whose messages have not been recorded for us. (Acts 13:1, Acts 15:32, Acts 21:9, etc). It is reasonable to assume that this is because they had messages intended for local situations and congregations and thus they were not included in the Word.

To prophesy specifically means to let God speak through you. This is different from preaching, which is teaching others from God's Word. Indeed, they are translated from two different words. In Aramaic, prophesy comes from מְתַנְבֵּינָא *methnabeyn* and in Greek, it comes from προφητεύω *propheteuo*, which means "to be a prophet, speak forth by divine inspirations, to predict".

Preach is translated from מַחְרֵז *machrez* in the Aramaic and κηρύσσω *kerusso* in the Greek, meaning "to publish, proclaim openly something which has been done; used of the public proclamation of the gospel and matters pertaining to it." (Both definitions are from the Online Bible)

This type of prophecy should be happening today as we move into the end times.—We need it to guide and strengthen us in our spiritual fight against the forces of darkness which are gathering strength for their open rebellion against God.

We can see that even at the very end of this era, God will still have His Prophets:

“And I will give authority to my two witnesses to prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth. These are the two olive trees and the two menorahs³ who stand before the Lord of the whole earth. And whoever seeks to harm them, fire comes out from their mouths and consumes their enemies. And those that choose to harm them, so it is given to them to be killed.⁴

“These have authority *given* to them to shut up heaven, so that the rain does not fall in the days of their prophecy;⁵ and they have authority *given* to them to

³ Exo 25:31-37: The menorah is a seven-branched lampstand that burns olive oil. It reminds us of God's seven day Creation and His seven Spirits.

⁴ Mal 4:5, 2Ki 1:10-12

⁵ 1Ki 17:1-18:45. One of these witnesses has indeed a spirit like Elijah's.

change water to blood, and to smite the earth with all plagues, as often as they desire.

“Now when their witnesses are complete, the beast that ascends from the sea⁶ will make war with them, and will conquer them, and it will kill them. And their corpses will come into the street of the great city where their Lord was impaled, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt.

“Then those from the peoples and generations and languages and nations will look upon their corpses for three and a half days,⁷ and they will not allow their corpses to be put in tombs. And the inhabitants of the earth will rejoice over them, and they will celebrate and send gifts to each other, because of the two prophets who tormented the inhabitants of the earth. Revelation 11:3 to 10

Eventually there will be a time when prophecy is no longer needed. This will occur once the Kingdom of God has been established on Earth and everyone knows God:

Because He found fault with them, He said: “Behold, the days are coming,” says Jehovah, “when I will perfect a New Covenant for the family of the house of Israel and for the family of the house of Judah; not like the covenant that I gave to their fathers in the day when I took their hands and I brought them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I also rejected them,” says Jehovah.

⁶ The Greek says the beast ascends from the abyss. The Aramaic shows that it comes from the sea, which symbolises the human nations.

⁷ This is like Jeshua, who was dead for most of three and a half days, as explained in [*God's Calendar and the Sign of Jonah*](#).

“For this is the covenant that I will give to the family of the house of Israel: After those days,” says Jehovah, “I will put My Instructions in their minds and write them upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they will be My people. No man will teach another citizen of his city nor his brother, saying, ‘Know Jehovah,’ for all will know Me, from their little ones to their elders. For I will make Atonement for their unrighteousness, and their sins I will not remember again.” Hebrews 8:8 to 12

Though all Bible-believing Christians already have God’s Instructions written in their hearts, this is not yet the case for the houses of Israel and Judah. Zechariah shows us when this will happen:

“It will be in that day that I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they have pierced; they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn. In that day there will be a great mourning in Jerusalem, like the mourning at Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. Zechariah 12:9 to 11

“In that day a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for uncleanness. It will be in that day,” says Jehovah of Hosts, “that I will cut off the names of the idols from the land, and they will no longer be remembered. I will also cause the prophets and the unclean spirit to depart from the land. Zechariah 13:1 to 2

God's gifts—every one of them—are needed by God's children on a daily basis to enable us to fulfil our part in God's Plans. These gifts were given to us at Pentecost in the year of Christ's crucifixion, and will remain with us until we no longer need them.—And we will need them until we are transformed into spirit-based children of God with abilities and composition like—but not equal to—Jehovah God our Father.

As we draw nearer to the time of Christ's Return, our need for God's Gifts grows greater as Satan's corruption of this world intensifies. To deny and reject these gifts is to leave ourselves and our brethren poorly defended against Satan's attacks. Those who refuse and suppress the gifts of God are either very foolish or servants of our enemy.

Let us ask Our Father to help us all find and develop our gifts, that we may be able to edify, exhort and comfort each other as He intended us to do.

May this gift be a blessing to you.

The Bible quotations in this article are from the Central Highlands
Congregation of God translation.

Central Highlands Congregation of God

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Revised 17th September

Published by

Central Highlands Christian Publications

PO Box 236, Creswick Vic 3363 Australia

Email info@chcpublications.net

Web Page: <https://chcpublications.net/>

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