

The Gift of Tongues

By Santiago Lange



The gift of tongues is a controversial and divisive issue for many Christians. By way of first mention, the gift of tongues was initiated into the New Testament scheme of things by Jesus Christ. It was in Mark's account of the Great Commission, in Mark 16:15-17, that He said (assuming that this controversial passage belongs to the inspired text) *"Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues ..."*

The gift of tongues was a part of the great Pentecostal event which resulted from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the 120 believers who had tarried as Jesus had commanded them.

Acts 2:1-4 "And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and begun to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."

This, then, is how the gift of tongues came on the scene of Biblical Christianity. First, Jesus Christ spoke about this gift shortly before He ascended into heaven. Then, just a few days later, along with the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the gift of tongues came on the scene through the lives and the ministries of the 120. Though this is by no means the initiation of tongues in the Word of God, it is the initiation of tongues into Christianity and in the New Testament.

Just how important was the gift of tongues during New Testament times? Let's briefly explore that question during the first 35 years of Christianity, or from the time Christ was crucified until the time the apostle Paul was martyred.

There are two basic ways in which the relevance of tongues during this period of time can be ascertained. We can determine, for example, the importance of "tongue speaking" by the **frequency** with which the gift is known to have occurred. The results of this determination are very revealing.

On the day of Pentecost, in Acts 2:4, we are told that men and women spoke in tongues at what turned to be an outdoor evangelistic service in which 3000 became converted. There is no evidence that the 3000 who came to Christ on that day spoke in tongues, like the 120.

The next occurrence of Tongues is recorded in Acts 10:44-46, some 10 or so years later than the original Pentecostal occurrence.

44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.

45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. 46 For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

This occurrence, in the house of one Cornelius, a Roman centurion, is the second occurrence, at a second time, at a second location.

The third Scriptural reference to tongues is found in Acts 19:4-6

4 Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." 5 On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 6 When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. 7 There were about twelve men in all.

This is the third occurrence, at a third time, at a third location.

The fourth reference to the gift of tongues is found in 1. Corinthians chapters 12, 13 and 14. This long passage refers to tongues in a fourth location, Corinth, but without any clue as to how many more times tongues was spoken.

Arguably, "tongue speaking" might have occurred frequently during this 35-year period of time in early Church history which was covered by the book of Acts and Paul's first Corinthian letter. The absence of evidence is not necessarily the evidence of absence. But, the fact that the Holy Spirit records tongues as having occurred only four times in a span of 35 years, and in only two books of the New Testament, should at least raise the question if perhaps the importance of tongues back in those days has been somewhat overblown by those of us who are living in the here and now.

We can also attempt to determine the importance of tongues during this period of time by examining the **priority** attached to the gift. Let's notice key Scriptures in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

1 Cor. 12:1: *"Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant."*

This statement of the apostle Paul establishes that a Christian can possess a spiritual gift and still **know little**, if any, of the Biblical truth related to that gift.

In the same chapter, in verse 28, we read

1 Cor. 12:28: *"God hath set some in the Church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues."*

Of the gifts listed by Paul in this verse, tongues is listed **lowest** in priority.

In 1 Cor 14:1 Paul admonishes Christians to *"follow after charity, and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy."*

The spiritual gift that Paul directs the Corinthians to desire the most is **not** the gift of tongues, but prophecy (meaning inspired preaching).

1 Cor. 14:19: *"Yet in the Church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue."*

Here we see again how unimportant "tongue speaking" is shown to be in comparison to the gift of prophecy, to inspired preaching.

Looking at this matter from two different viewpoints, the number of times tongue speaking is referred to and the value placed upon tongues by the apostle Paul, one can defend that the gift of tongues was not one of the major spiritual gifts during the first 35 years of the Christian era.

But, what about the importance of the gift of tongues in church history? To this question, just one general comment should suffice. The truth of the matter is that throughout the course of Church history the spiritual gift of tongues was not mentioned, not advocated, or not practiced by some of the most outstanding Christian figures: This long list includes John Chrysostom, Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, just to mention a few. It seems quite clear, that the gift of tongues did not play a key role in the experience and mind of these Christians.

In summary, there are a number of facts about speaking in tongues that we can derive from Scripture:

- 1. Speaking in tongues is not the definitive evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Not all the Corinthians spoke in tongues (1 Corinthians 14:5), but they had all been baptized (12:13).*
- 2. The fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) does not include speaking in tongues. Therefore, Christlikeness does not require speaking in tongues.*
- 3. Most of the New Testament writers are silent on tongues. Only three books (Acts, 1 Corinthians, and Mark) mention it. (Note: Mark 16:17 is not in the two best Greek manuscripts.) Significantly, many of the other New Testament books speak a great deal about the Holy Spirit but fail to even mention speaking in tongues.*
- 4. There are more important gifts than tongues, and these are to be sought (1 Corinthians 12:28, 31).*

Source: Ron Rhodes, The Complete Book of Bible Answers, (Harvest House Publishers, Eugene, OR; 1997), p. 91

Wherever we might personally stand theologically in this issue, recognizing our own particular biases, let's keep and protect the right Christian approach. The Apostle Paul tells us powerfully in 1. Corinthians 13:1-13 what this understanding ought to be.

1 If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. 4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres. 8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. 11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. 12 For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. 13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. □