

(Knowing God's Way) 19. the Truth About Speaking in Tongues

by Zac Poonen

The gift of tongues is a perfect gift from God, but it is not a requirement for all believers, and it is not something that can be learned or forced.

Scripture: Mark 16:17, Acts 1:8, Acts 2:4, Acts 10:46, 1 Corinthians 12:7-11, 1 Corinthians 12:30, 1 Corinthians 13:1, 1 Corinthians 14:2, 1 Corinthians 14:39, James 1:17

Topics: "Speaking in Tongues", "Spiritual Gifts"

Description

Zac Poonen emphasizes the significance of the gift of speaking in tongues, asserting that it is a perfect gift from God, who never changes and knows the needs of the church. He addresses the controversies surrounding this gift, encouraging believers to adhere strictly to Scripture and understand that not all believers will possess this gift, as it is distributed by the Holy Spirit as He wills. Poonen highlights the importance of love in the exercise of spiritual gifts and warns against the misuse and misunderstanding of tongues in church settings. Ultimately, he calls for a focus on the power of the Holy Spirit and a deep devotion to Christ over the pursuit of specific gifts.

Transcript

"Every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation (change)" (James. 1:17).

God never makes a mistake, He never changes and He gives only perfect gifts. Therefore when He gave the gift of "speaking in unknown languages" ("tongues") to the church on the day of Pentecost, He knew exactly what He was doing. The gift of "tongues" was a perfect gift. God has not changed His mind about the gift, for He never changes.

God knew the controversies that would surround this gift in the 20th century. Yet He felt the church needed this gift to fulfil its ministry.

Even major truths such as the Trinity, the Deity of Christ, the Humanity of Christ and the Person of the Holy Spirit have been opposed and have faced controversy in the history of Christendom. So it should not surprise us if the gift of "tongues" has been controversial too.

It is always best to stick exactly to what Scripture says on all doctrinal matters. Let us look then, with an unprejudiced mind, at every single verse in the Bible on the subject of "speaking in tongues" :

Truth No. 1:

Mark 16:17: [Jesus said,] "These signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues... they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover."

Jesus said that some of the signs accompanying the company of "those who have believed" would be speaking in tongues, casting out demons and healing the sick. He did not say that ALL these signs would accompany EVERY believer. But He said that these signs would be found among the company of "those who have believed".

So every believer need not have all these gifts. Neither need every church have all these gifts. But they will be found in the whole church worldwide. The Holy Spirit sovereignly decides whom to give the gifts to.

Truth No. 2:

Acts 2:4,7,11: "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance..... And the Jews from every nation marvelled saying....`We hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God.'"

The first time that believers were filled with the Holy Spirit, they ALL spoke in tongues. The "tongues" were languages that others understood immediately. So there was no need for the gift of interpretation.

Notice also in verse 4 that it was the persons themselves who began to speak in tongues and not the Holy Spirit. The Spirit did not move their tongues. The Spirit only gave them utterance. They spoke themselves.

In no gift, does the Holy Spirit take away freedom of choice from us. In fact, the fruit of the Spirit is "self-control" (Gal.5:23). Only demon-possessed people lose control of themselves. One who is filled with the Spirit will have more control over himself than anyone else. "The spirit of the prophets is subject to the control of the prophets" (1 Cor.14:32).

Truth No. 3:

Acts 10:46: "They were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God."

Here, in the house of Cornelius, all who were in his house were baptized in the Holy Spirit, at the same moment as they were converted to Christ. They spoke in "tongues" exalting God (praising Him) - not speaking to people, as was the case on the day of Pentecost.

Truth No. 4:

Acts 19:6: "When Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking with tongues and prophesying"

The Holy Spirit came upon the believers in Ephesus, when Paul laid hands on them. The "tongues" here seems to have been prophesying.

[Note the following facts from the above instances in "Acts":

(a) In Acts 2 they received the Spirit, AFTER water baptism. In Acts 10, they received the Spirit BEFORE water baptism.

(b) In Acts 2 and 10, they received the Spirit WITHOUT anyone laying hands on them. In Acts 19, they received the Spirit AFTER Paul laid hands on them.

(This proves that there is no standard pattern for receiving the Spirit. It could be either before or after water-baptism, and also with or without the laying on of hands).

(c) In Acts 8:14-18, when the disciples in Samaria received the Holy Spirit, there is no mention that they spoke in tongues. But Simon the magician did see some evidence (we are not told what it was) which made him want the same ability that Peter had.]

Truth No. 5:

1 Cor. 12:7,8,10: "But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit.... to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues."

The gift of tongues is for "the common good" - the good of the church. This was written 25 years after the day of Pentecost. And the gift of tongues was still being given then by the Spirit "for the common good".

Truth No. 6:

1 Cor.12:11: "But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills".

This is perhaps the clearest Scripture that teaches that the Holy Spirit sovereignly decides to whom to give each gift (including the gift of tongues). We cannot dictate to Him whom He should give any gift to.

Truth No. 7:

1 Cor. 12:28: "God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then... various kinds of tongues."

It is God Who appointed the gift of tongues in the church - for some purpose. So we should never oppose this gift, lest we be found opposing God. Remember that He has more wisdom than we have.

Truth No. 8:

1 Cor. 12:30: "All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they?"

All believers DO NOT speak in tongues, just like all believers do not have the gifts of healing.

So obviously, God does NOT feel that "tongues" is an essential gift for all believers - either for being holy or for being effective in His service. If it were, He would have given this gift to everyone.

Truth No. 9:

1 Cor. 13:1: "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."

Speaking in tongues without love is useless. All pride in those who speak in tongues, and all "looking down" on others who don't speak in tongues is because of a lack of love. Such unloving believers who speak in tongues are as repulsive to God as a noisy gong is to us.

Truth No. 10:

1 Cor. 13:8: "Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away."

When perfection comes at Christ's return, there will be no more need for speaking in tongues.

In heaven, there will be no need for "tongues" - just like there will be no more need for Bible-knowledge or prophecy.

So "tongues" is a temporary gift needed only under the imperfect conditions prevalent on earth.

This explains why Jesus never needed the gift of tongues. It was because His mind was perfectly pure and because He lived in perfect communion with His Father at all times,

Truth No. 11:

1 Cor. 14:2: "One who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men, but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries."

The gift of tongues mentioned here is obviously different from the one manifested on the day of Pentecost - for this gift is NOT to "speak to men but to God" and no-one can understand what the speaker is saying.

Truth No. 12:

1 Cor. 14:4: "One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself

The gift of tongues enables a believer to build himself up spiritually.

Truth No. 13:

1 Cor. 14:5: "I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying. But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what shall I profit you, unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching?"

Paul wished that ALL spoke in tongues. This is yet another verse that clearly indicates that all believers do NOT speak in tongues.

Paul's wish here is similar to his wish that ALL should be single like he himself was (as he states earlier in the same letter - 1 Cor.7:7). Paul saw some benefits in being single. He also saw some benefits in speaking in tongues. But Paul recognised that just as God was sovereign in giving the "gift of being single" only to some believers, He was equally sovereign in giving the "gift of tongues" also only to some

believers.

Therefore it is as foolish to expect all believers to speak in tongues as it is to expect all believers to be single!!

In the church-meeting, it is far better to prophesy (that is, to speak God's Word "to encourage, edify and console" others - 1 Cor. 14:3). If however a `tongue' is interpreted, then it is equal to prophecy.

Truth No. 14:

1 Cor. 14:9,13: "Unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear (understandable), how will it be known what is spoken?.....Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret."

"Tongues" must be interpreted when used in a church meeting.

Truth No. 15:

1 Cor. 14:14: "If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. What is the outcome then? I shall pray with the spirit and I shall pray with the mind. I shall sing with the spirit and I shall sing with the mind."

When praying in tongues, a person cannot understand what he is praying. But Paul still felt that he should pray and sing "with the spirit" (in tongues), as much as he did with his mind (in a known language).

Truth No. 16:

1 Cor. 14:18: "I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all."

Paul was thankful to God for this gift. So it must have helped him.

Truth No. 17:

1 Cor. 14:19: "However, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind, that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue."

In the church, speaking in a known language is always the best.

Truth No. 18:

1 Cor. 14:22: "Tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers"

Tongues are for a sign to unbelievers - as on the day of Pentecost.

Truth No. 19:

1 Cor. 14:23: "If therefore the whole church should assemble together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad?"

It is madness for all to speak in tongues in a church-meeting - for no-one will understand what anyone is saying. (This must obviously be referring to people speaking in tongues individually and not when all are praying together - for in the latter case, we do not listen to the prayers of even those who pray in a known tongue.)

Truth No. 20:

1 Cor. 14:26, 27: "What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and let one interpret;"

Not more than two or three should speak in tongues in a meeting of the church, but each "tongue" must be interpreted. "Interpretation" is NOT the same as "translation". Translation is "word for word". Interpretation is "expressing the thought in one's own words".

Truth No. 21:

1 Cor. 14:39: "Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues."

This then is the conclusion. Don't forbid the exercise of the gift of tongues. But if you are desiring a gift, seek for the gift of prophecy more than for the gift of tongues.

The True And The Counterfeit

There is a certain amount of mystery about the gift of tongues, as all those who have received the gift will acknowledge - if they are honest. We do not know everything about it. We know only in part (1 Cor.13:12).

As one who has spoken in tongues for the past 24 years, let me add a few words concerning what I presently understand about the gift, from my own experience.

When a person speaks in tongues, his spirit (heart) speaks forth syllables (directly from his heart to his mouth, bypassing his mind) and thus he pours out whatever is in his heart to God - whether that be an overflow of joy or a burden caused by sorrow or discouragement. Thus the pressure on his heart is relieved. That is how he is 'edified'.

As we saw earlier in Acts 2:4, when anyone speaks in tongues, it is the person himself who speaks, and not the Holy Spirit. The believer forms the syllables himself, just as he does when speaking in a known language. The only difference is that now, he does NOT use a known language to pray, but concentrating on the Lord, speaks forth syllables with his mouth, straight from his heart, bypassing his mind - knowing that God understands the longings and pressures in his heart, even if he cannot understand himself what he is saying.

Unburdening himself like that in moments of pressure helps a believer, especially if his mind is too tired to pray in a known language. We may not be able to explain how this works, but it does.

Let us now look at the gift of interpretation: As we have already seen, interpretation of a tongue is equivalent to prophesying. So this gift will usually be given by the Spirit to one who has the gift of prophecy as well.

In a church-meeting, if someone speaks in a tongue, one of those having the gift of prophecy (usually one of the elders), if he is walking in the light of God, will find a thought being impressed on his mind, if the "tongue" is genuinely from God. He speaks forth that thought in his own words - for it is NOT a translation, but an interpretation.

If another elder (who also has the gift of interpretation) had interpreted the "tongue", the interpretation would have been the same (although couched in that elder's own words). This would be the case if both elders were in perfect touch with the Lord.

Since no revelation from God can contradict what is written in the Bible, the interpretation will be in accordance with Scripture - just like all true prophecy will also be in line with the Scriptures.

Some who are sceptical of spiritual gifts have asked this question: If a "tongue" that was interpreted in a meeting, is copied on to a tape and someone else (with the gift of interpretation) in another place is asked to interpret it, will the interpretation be the same as the first one? The answer is: It should be, if both interpreters had a perfect understanding of the mind of the Lord. If the interpretation is different in content, (and not just in words), that would only indicate that one or both interpreters are not in such perfect touch with the Lord as to understand His mind perfectly. That is not abnormal, because no believer in the world is in such perfect touch with the Lord as to know His mind perfectly.

The following example will prove this fact beyond any doubt: Suppose you have to speak in a meeting and you have a particular message on your heart which you feel is the burden of the Lord for that meeting. Then, if you are unable to be at that meeting and someone else speaks in your stead, strictly speaking, he should give the same message as you had on your heart (even if it be in his own words). If that brother doesn't give the same message as you had on your heart, it would indicate that one of you did not have a perfect understanding of the Lord's mind for that meeting. So we see that believers could fail such a test even when giving a message in a known language.

That's why the Bible tells us to judge even a prophet's message (1 Cor.14:29). Similarly, we should judge, all messages in "tongues" and their "interpretations". What should we judge in such cases? Just this: Whether our spirit witnesses that the utterance (prophecy, tongues or interpretation) was Scriptural (and from the Lord) or not.

We are warned (in 1 John 4:1) not to believe every spirit but to "test the spirits whether they are of God". So every time, we hear "tongues" or interpretation in public, we must test it in our spirits. Many of the "supernatural utterances" we hear may not be from God. We must always reject a prophecy (or any part of it), a "tongue", or an interpretation, if we feel uneasy about it in our spirits, for any reason.

It is the unquestioning acceptance of everything supernatural and abnormal that has brought tremendous confusion into Christendom in this century - and tremendous dishonor to the Lord's Name as well.

Notice these facts in all instances of speaking in tongues in "Acts" :

- (a) In every case, the speaking in tongues was spontaneous;
- (b) In every case, ALL spoke in tongues - there were no exceptions;
- (c) In every case, there was no coaching or urging or instruction given on how to speak in tongues;

Today however, in most places, NONE of the above characteristics are found. Only where the gift of tongues is spontaneously received without any coaching, can we conclude that it COULD BE genuine.

Of all the "speaking in tongues" that I have heard, my spirit has borne witness to only a small percentage of it as genuine. Most of the rest I have felt was an attempt to imitate the gift - either to be accepted by

others in a group or to impress them. A small percentage could even be of demonic origin. My observations are based on the fruit and the results that I have seen in the lives of many people in many lands. Speaking and singing in tongues often appears to be a form of "exhibitionism" in many churches - and exhibitionism is characteristic of little children.

It is also a well-established fact that, at this present time, the maximum exploitation of believers for financial gain is practised by those preachers and pastors who claim to "speak in tongues". Most of the cults in the 20th century have also developed from tongue-speaking groups.

My advice to all believers therefore is: "Avoid churches that major on the gifts of tongues and healing - because many of them go to dangerous extremes and usually don't have spiritually-minded leaders. Seek instead for fellowship with a church that emphasises holiness and disciple-making primarily, that accepts the genuine gift of tongues and that does not covet your money or seek to control your life.

Let me also emphasise that we need to use our mind (renewed by the Holy Spirit) if we are to understand God's will and His Word aright (Rom.12:2). Many believers tend to despise their minds. Our mind is to be like a wife. She should not be the head of the home. But she should not be killed either!! Jesus is our husband and head. Our mind should be submissive to Him through our heart.

In a nutshell then, here is a bit of sane advice on "tongues":

"If God gives you the gift of tongues, receive it and exercise it. Speak forth the syllables from your heart to God when you are alone with Him - anywhere - and especially when your heart is under pressure (through discouragement) or overflowing with joy. If you don't have the gift, don't worry about it. But be open to the Lord to receive it, at all times. Don't be against it and don't get into a frenzy to receive it. God will give it to you, if He wants you to have it, without any frenzy on your part. At the same time, don't believe that everything you see and hear in Christendom is inspired by the Holy Spirit. Test everything. Use your God-given faculties of discernment. If you don't have the gift of tongues, don't consider yourself inferior to those who have it. And if you do have the gift, don't imagine that it makes you spiritual or superior to those who don't have it. (Paul and the Corinthian Christians both spoke in tongues. But Paul was a spiritual giant, while the Corinthians were carnal!!).

What Is Absolutely Essential

What is absolutely essential for all of us is to be ENDUED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT'S POWER. It is POWER, and not speaking in tongues that is the evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8).

The Holy Spirit is to be received BY FAITH (Jn.7:37-39), just as we received the forgiveness of our sins - on the basis of Christ's merit alone, and not on our own merit. We do not receive the GIFT of the Spirit by fasting or praying or by any other work. He is a GIFT (Acts 2:38).

We ask and receive - immediately by faith - and go forth believing in God's promise that He gives the Holy Spirit more readily to those who ask Him than any earthly father would give food to a hungry son (Lk.11:13). If we are unsure about having received the Spirit, we can ask God to give us an assurance. He will not deny us such an assurance.

But we need to be filled with the Spirit continually (because we are leaky vessels - Eph.5:18), just like we need to be forgiven continually (because we sin - often without knowing it - Matt.6:12).

The devotion of our heart to Christ is FAR MORE important than our speaking in tongues. "Do you love Me more than everything else?", was our Lord's question to Peter, before commissioning him for His service. Arguments about "speaking in tongues" are therefore a diversion arranged by Satan to sidetrack believers from total devotion to Christ.

The greatest Christians in the world have been those who loved the Lord Jesus supremely - whether they spoke in tongues or not. Some like Peter, James, John and Paul spoke in tongues. Others like John Wesley, Charles Finney, D.L.Moody, A.B.Simpson, William Booth, C.T.Studd and Watchman Nee never spoke in tongues (as far as we know). But they ALL received the baptism in the Holy Spirit, they ALL loved the Lord with all their hearts and they ALL walked the way of the cross. These truths were central in their lives. Other things were secondary.

Let us follow their example and we won't go wrong..

He who has ears to hear let him hear.

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