

TONGUES - ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW & MORE

If the importance of ‘tongues’ was judged by the number of questions asked about it, it would stand head and shoulders above the Resurrection itself !

Part I – GIFTS

‘Speaking in tongues’ is one of God’s gifts – or *charisms*.

God’s greatest gift is given in Romans 6:23 - ***For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is ETERNAL LIFE in Christ Jesus our Lord.***

There are many lesser, unmerited free gifts, and the main ones appear in various lists in the New Testament –

- St. Paul in Romans 12:3-8 has:

PROPHECY,
MINISTRY,
TEACHING,
EXHORTATION,
GIVING,
LEADING and
SHOWING COMPASSION.

These are *God’s gifts* (11:29), that is to say, given by God the Father. Paul explains that ***as in one body we have many members... not all the members have the same function.*** (12:4)

- In Ephesians 4:12 charisms are ***to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God...***(4:12-13). They are:
APOSTLES,
PROPHETS,
EVANGELISTS,
PASTORS and
TEACHERS.

Christ is the giver: ***The gifts he [Christ] gave were...***(4:11)

- In the 1st letter to the Corinthians (12:8-10) the following are mentioned. There are three knowing-gifts, three doing-gifts and three speaking-gifts.
Knowing gifts -
DISCERNMENT,
KNOWLEDGE and
WISDOM.
Doing gifts -
HEALING,
MIRACLES and
FAITH.

Speaking gifts -
PROPHECY,
TONGUES and
INTERPRETATION.

APOSTLES, HELPERS and ADMINISTRATORS also crop up later in verse 28.

- The 1st letter of Peter (4:11) shows that abilities of SPEAKING and SERVING can also be God-given.

UNDERSTANDING GIFTS

When Paul wrote to the Corinthian church about gifts/charisms he started by admitting they had the lot! (1 Corinthians 1:7) Clearly, possessing them did not automatically bring much understanding of them, for Paul later spent over two chapters (12-14) on them, prefacing them with the famous line *Now concerning spiritual gifts... I do not want you to be uninformed* (12:1). So, cheer up if you don't know much about them – you're not the first – or last!

‘Spirituals’

While our translation has *Now concerning spiritual gifts*, the original Greek is just ‘*concerning the spirituals*’, and this points to one reason why they are not understood. I'll leave Paul to speak for himself from earlier in his letter:

For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.

And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are discerned spiritually.

(1 Corinthians 2:11-14)

The ‘CHARISMATIC RENEWAL’

This is one name given to the movement, and readers will recognise in it the word ‘charism’ (the Greek word for ‘Gift’) mentioned above. The word ‘charismatic’ is useful in that it is clearly not us but God who is the source of these gifts for the Church. (The Church's widespread failure indicates how easily we presume that it is designed to run on human abilities!)

‘Charismatic’ is not a useful word, however, if it is taken to imply that Christians who are blessed by the Holy Spirit do, or should, immediately get pre-occupied with the gifts. Some do. It's an easy error.

Part II – REASONS WHY QUESTIONS ARE ASKED

The following list outlines the main reasons why folk ask questions about Tongues:

- The Western World – and much of the Church – is reason-dominated and suspicious of all that falls outside its analysis, e.g. like religious experience.
- There is widespread and wise mistrust of the spooky in ordinary life. The old title ‘Holy Ghost’ does not help much!
- There is a proper fear of unknown forces, like mediums (or ‘sensitives’ as they now call themselves) who speak when voluntarily possessed in a trance.
- The unusual is of more interest than the familiar.
- The unfamiliar creates unease. Questioning can be an attacking device to try to keep at a distance that which we feel to be threatening.
- There are many usual results from the Holy Spirit’s blessing, e.g. personally encountering Jesus; a growing awareness of the Father; a new love of Scripture; a new courage to give testimony; a greater freedom from sin, etc. Unlike these, tongues may be instantly apparent.
- Some teach that the gift of tongues guarantees blessing, that it is sacramental (‘an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace’) and that the lack of tongues means a lack of genuine, real or full blessing.
- All groups are helped by means of identification. Among certain Christians, tongues can become a badge of membership.
- Some question tongues because they are ignorant of Scriptural teaching.
- Speaking in tongues has increased in the last forty years because of the world-wide renewing work of the Holy Spirit. What was once almost confined to the Pentecostal churches is now familiar in every Christian tradition. No less than 80-million Roman Catholics term themselves ‘Catholic Pentecostals’ and would use tongues in their private devotions.
- Knowing about this movement prompts many to ask questions because they feel a spiritual thirst for the experience of the Holy Spirit and his gifts, to offset the spiritual dryness and exhaustion they thought was inevitable.

Part III – ‘OH LORD, OPEN MY LIPS’

Many will be familiar with this prayer (from Psalm 51), and the response often used in worship *and our mouths will declare your praise*. It is a good reminder that in a society which sets great store on words, our speech does not reach its pinnacle in drama, reciting literature, clinching business deals, winning arguments, wooing a lover, influencing people or inspiring fame.

The highest our speech can soar is when it praises God, whether that be said or sung, aloud or silent. God’s praise, therefore, can be as wonderful from the dumb, the stammerers or the illiterate as from well-known Christian speakers. (Dennis Bennett in *The Holy Spirit and You* has a wonderful story of a dumb girl who was actually able to praise God by speaking in tongues.)

One characteristic of the British is their ‘stiff upper lip’, and as our society seems to be getting more joyless, disillusioned and fearful I can only envisage them getting stiffer!

Of increasing importance, then, is the prayer *O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise*.

Part IV – RESPONSES TO TEN OFTEN-ASKED QUESTIONS

Question 1: What is ‘tongues’?

When a person uses language-sounds that are neither understood nor known to them.

Question 2: Are tongues-speakers in an odd state, trance, hallucination, etc.?

Not at all. There were no grounds whatever for the New English Bible’s translators to insert the word ‘ecstatic’ some sixteen times in Paul’s passage about tongues (1 Corinthians 12:10, 28, 30, 13:8, 14:2, 4, 5, 5, 6, 19, 23, 26, 27). Paul wrote nothing of the kind. Their deliberate linking of ‘tongues’ with states of ecstasy and trance-states reached its worst with their notorious translation of 14:13 *the man who falls into ecstatic utterance*. It indicates how wrong they were that when the New English Bible was revised (as the Revised English Bible) they reverted simply to St. Paul’s – *Anyone who speaks in tongues...* and about time too!

[When the popular Bible scholar William Barclay published his commentaries on each New Testament book his comment on ‘tongues’ in this passage was – ‘In it [this phenomena] a man became worked up to an ecstasy and frenzy, and in that state he poured out a quite uncontrollable torrent of sounds in no known language’. He was always strongly influenced by the ancient world outside of Scripture. The pagan version in classical times will have been ‘ecstatic’ but the Spirit’s gift in Christ’s church certainly IS NOT!

When Barclay translated the New Testament he inserted the word ‘ecstatic’, and the New English Bible translators probably took his lead. Had he popped into a local Pentecostal church and witnessed it for himself, he would not have misled so many. When the King James’s translators came to the word *tongue*, they inserted before it the word ‘*unknown*’, but put it in italics to show readers that it was not in St. Paul. Some translations have followed their example. The Good News Bible inserts the word *strange*. The Roman Catholic *Jerusalem Bible* and the *New Living Bible* elaborate it in a straightforward way – *the gift of speaking in tongues*. The most sensitive choice for an inserted word is, in my view, that of the Jewish Christian Dr. Heinz Cassirer in his translation of the New Testament called *God’s New Covenant*. He has *inspired tongue*. An inspired translation – it retains the singular that St. Paul wrote, and *inspiration* is all about being breathed into by the Holy Spirit.]

Question 3: Are tongues-speakers in control of tongues?

Yes. The control to start, stop and its volume are the same as ordinary talk. St. Paul has a chapter about tongues and prophecy (1 Corinthians 14). What he says about exercising the gift of prophecy is true also of the gift of tongues:

For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged. And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets, for God is a God not of disorder but of peace.
(verses 31-33)

Moreover, the Holy Spirit is a spirit of *self-discipline* (2 Timothy 1:7) and one of his fruits (Galatians 5:23) is *self-control*. The Holy Spirit could not act against himself.

Question 4: Don't non-Christians speak in tongues too?

Yes. The last two answers illustrate the difference. The Christian gift does not involve states of madness, mediumship, trances, being out-of-control, and so on.

Question 5: What does speaking-in-tongues sound like?

If you imagine overhearing a language you do not know, then hearing people speaking-in-tongues is virtually the same. But since praise is necessarily repetitive, it may have repeating phrases if praising God, as does much Christian praise.

Question 6: Is praising God the main purpose of tongues?

What does Scripture teach? There are FIVE IMPORTANT ACCOUNTS IN ACTS OF FOLK 'RECEIVING THE HOLY SPIRIT'. We'll look at each of them in turn. Three of them mention tongues.

- In Jerusalem at Pentecost –
All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:4)
...in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power. All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' (Acts 2:11-12)
- In Caesarea, at the house of the Gentile Cornelius –
The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. (Acts 10:45-46)
- In Ephesus, Paul met Christians who had not even heard of the Holy Spirit –
When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied (Acts 19:6)

Tongues seems to have been the first gift exercised on each of these three occasions, and praise is specifically mentioned in the first two. The two other accounts in the Acts of the Apostles of receiving the Holy Spirit are:

- In Samaria during Peter and John's visit –
They went to Christians there *for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 8:16)*
The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit.

Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.
(Acts 8:15,17)

Tongues are not mentioned as such, but something perceptible happened for *Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands* (Acts 8:18)

- In Jerusalem, after the release of Peter and John from prison -
When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.
(Acts 4:31)

Again there is no mention of tongues, though the account is very brief. But, note, the author thought that testifying to others was the most important item to record.

Question 7: Why does God need to be praised in unknown languages?

He doesn't! It is probably more related to God's love for us and our needs, than to his needs. 1 Corinthians 14:4 has *those who speak in a tongue build up themselves.*

Question 8: But how then does tongues help the individual?

Jesus promised *'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."' Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.* (John 7:37-39)

Older translations were less coy and had *'out of his belly will flow rivers...'*

Jesus was referring to the deepest inner levels of the believer's personality. It is most often translated *heart* (Revised Standard Version, Good News, New Jerusalem Bible, New Revised Standard Version & Revised King James Version), but that can appear sentimental nowadays; *breast* is too Victorian (Jerusalem Bible) and *within him* is too vague! (New English Bible, New International Version, New American Bible & Revised English Bible). The Living Bible's *inmost being* is good.

Tom Smail talks about the 'gut-level of our personality' where the Holy Spirit comes to bring integration and freedom. So many of us are split between head and heart, between mind and feeling. The Holy Spirit works to heal, to make whole and make one, and it is right from the 'guts' of our personality that is getting integrated that the real and deep things come. Tongues, which by-pass mental processes, can be a sign of that.

Question 9: 'Which by-pass mental processes' strikes me as dangerous...

I appreciate your reaction! But no, in fact it isn't. It is by-passing the *will* that is indeed dangerous. One side of our brain deals with thinking and speech, and the other with surrender and creativity. Faced with something lovely – a sunset, fireworks, a new-born baby – we may find 'words fail us', and resort to ooh's and aaah's! St. Paul writes *If I pray in a tongue, my*

spirit prays but my mind is unproductive (1 Corinthians 14:14) or *contributes nothing* (New American Bible).

Paul knew from first hand experience and it did not bother him, indeed four years later he boasts *I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you* (1 Corinthians 14:18). The by-passing of mental processes means, as Michael Green points out, that folk can pray in tongues while driving or washing up without danger or disaster! (When Paul tells us to *pray without ceasing* (1 Thessalonians 5:17) he cannot require of us continual mental involvement.)

Question 10: Isn't suggesting 'continuous prayer' unhealthy and impractical?

The New Testament explains it. Paul says of the tongues-speaker '*for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit.*' (1 Corinthians 14:2). Paul explains how it is the Holy Spirit within us who prays: *the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.* (Romans 8:26)

The Christians mentioned earlier who see tongues in sacramental terms are right, it is not so much a thing in itself but it is likely to be an outward sign of inward grace.

Part V – IF I WANTED TO SPEAK IN TONGUES

Following on from question 10 in the last section, the first thing to do is to seek the blessing of the Holy Spirit. The five passages in Acts (quoted under question 6 in the last section) are crucial if you want to understand it better. [See also the articles **Blessings – Helping to Retain Them** and **Growing Daily in the Holy Spirit** on this website.] Once blessed in the Holy Spirit, see then if tongues is part of the overflow of that blessing in your life.

The 17th century Book of Common Prayer expected us to grow *daily* in the Holy Spirit. The idea is not new! The majority of Christian hymns about the Holy Spirit have words of invitation ‘*Come...come...*’

The Christian should experience daily comings of the Holy Spirit – which is why many Christians pray daily for the Spirit of Jesus to be renewed in them. No experience of the Holy Spirit’s coming invalidates or makes unnecessary his other ‘comings’.

Being ‘full’ of the Holy Spirit is not a one-time state that will last forever, the Holy Spirit is better measured as we do love, rather than as we measure liquid.

Our motives don’t need to be perfect, but they need to be clear.

- Are we seeking to do something to help us keep up with/overtake the spiritual Joneses?
- Does some *outward* ability like tongues appeal to our sense of religious status/pride?
- Would the knowledge that we can speak-in-tongues enable us to hold our head high among our Christian friends?

God is the giver. Charisms are not rewards for goodness, nor badges of maturity, nor signs of special favour, but his gifts to help encourage us, deepen our prayer and worship and strengthen our witness.

DEDICATION

Everyone seems to be concerned about ‘Motivation’ nowadays. Does it apply here? The word, associated with ‘motor’, has (for me) a strong association with the personal ‘energy’ that can make a team win. If it gives the impression that a charism can be created by our efforts it is unhelpful.

‘Dedication’ is a better word. Wholehearted commitment; dedicated to serving Jesus Christ as soldier and servant; wholehearted longing to be *sanctified* [made holy] **by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ.** (1 Peter 1:2)

This is the dedication and direction that is right for receiving any spiritual gift, and the necessary orientation for its right use.

When, after the Crucifixion, the frightened disciples locked themselves in for fear of the Jews (John 20:19-23) Jesus came to them and said:

‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’

He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’

To be sent by Christ required **being empowered by his Spirit**.
To be empowered by the Spirit is **equipment to go**.

ASK

If you are being drawn into living worship and sent into living witness and are thirsty for all God has to give you in a life dedicated totally to his service, then ask God for the gift of tongues. Jesus taught:

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish?

Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?

If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit* to those who ask him!

(Luke 11:11-13, but see also Matthew 7:9-11)

[*Matthew wrote *give good things*. They are both true!]

Paul encouraged us to ***strive for the spiritual gifts***. (1 Corinthians 14:1)

WHAT WOULD I DO ACTUALLY TO SPEAK IN TONGUES –

- Ponder the answers given so far in this section
- Take any appropriate and necessary steps, e.g. Rededication? Confession? Forgiveness? Recommitment?
- Trust God to be faithful to his promises. Ask God, knowing that he wishes you to have ***the good things of the Holy Spirit***.
- Focus on God, his greatness and his love displayed on the Cross of Christ. Re-read the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) and remind yourself of the Father's love and acceptance of us as heirs in Christ (Romans 8:15ff)
- Speak (or sing) syllables of speech but not in any known order. [Speaking-in-tongues is essentially something we do which becomes transformed by the Holy Spirit. It requires our action, God does not treat us like a ventriloquist's dummy. Tongues are not the result of spiritual take-over, but of our spiritual co-operation.]

RESULTS

The results might be any of the three we expect from other asking-prayers:

Yes

No

Wait

If 'Yes' then either immediately or gradually you may find a deep inner moving that carries the words along with you and for you.

- Don't be put off by doubts, 'Is it genuine?' Relax. You didn't ride a bicycle immediately, but soon knew without a doubt when you could!
- Accompanying this outward sign may be deep inner moves of healing, reconciliation, praise or worship.

- Use the gift regularly. It will bring a deep peace and help in prayer if used in a God-centred way.

If ‘**No**’ don’t strive, don’t feel guilty – or let others make you feel guilty that God’s answer was not what they taught or expected. But acknowledge that things like fear and self-consciousness can postpone our receiving.

- Rejoice in what you know God *has* done for you and given you.
- Don’t let an apparent ‘no’ answer get you down. It may just mean ‘**Wait**’. It is not a reward for being good, and its absence is not a punishment for being bad! To speak in tongues may well be a mark of peace and release, so don’t let the Devil turn the subject into one of guilt, bondage, fear or condemnation.
- Rejoice in the Lord always!

Part VI – SHOULD ALL BE GIVEN THE GIFT OF TONGUES?

Some today teach or imply that all should be given the gift of tongues. St. Paul did neither:

All these [gifts] are activated by one and the same Spirit, who

allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. (1 Corinthians 12:11)

Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? (verses 29-30)

Since the Spirit *allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses*, the only and obvious answer to each of Paul’s rhetorical questions is – ‘No’.

God’s ‘Yes’ is a ‘gift’ not a reward. His ‘No’ is no punishment. Allow the Spirit *to allot to each one individually*. Let him determine! Keep expecting! God’s tomorrow is always full of new things. God is generous when our hands are open and we thirst for him. Do not destroy his blessing by being pre-occupied by what he withholds. You may miss great areas of healing and renewal that he may well be lavishing upon you!

A Gift of Tears is often given to those who are not given a gift of Tongues.

[See the article **Tears – Gift of the Holy Spirit?** on this website]

SOME FURTHER SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

- *These signs will accompany those who believe... they will speak in new tongues...*(Mark 16:17)
- *I [Paul] would like all of you to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy.* (1 Corinthians 14:5)
- *Nevertheless, in church I [Paul] would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.* (1 Corinthians 14:19)
- *...one who speaks in a tongue [in public worship] should pray for the power to interpret.* (1 Corinthians 14:13)
- *If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your mind?* (1 Corinthians 14:23)
- *When you come together, [in worship] each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God.* (1 Corinthians 14:26-28)
- *...do not forbid speaking in tongues; but all things should be done decently and in order.* (1 Corinthians 14:39-40)
- *Tongues, then, are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers,* (1 Corinthians 14:22, see 22-25 for why)

- *If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal,... Love never ends. ...as for tongues, they will cease;* (1 Corinthians 13:1,8)

A PRAYER

You may like to use this regularly over a period of time.

Abba, Father, gracious God,

**I thank you for your gift of Jesus, my Saviour, my Lord and my God.
In his great love he gave his life for me,
In my all-too-little love I offer my life (anew) to you in Jesus' service.**

**As you send me out to witness, breathe your Spirit (afresh) upon me.
Equip me and 'baptise' me with your Holy Spirit,
Renew me daily; rekindle your fires within;
Refresh with your living water.**

Help me to stir up your gifts within me.

**O Lord, open my lips, that my mouth shall show forth your praise,
O Lord, open my heart, that my life may show forth your love.
I ask this for your glory, dear Father, in Jesus' Name. Amen.**

APPENDIX

Index of Bible references:

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	8:15, 8:16 & 8:17	IV
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