
Chapter 12.4

The Biblical Gift of Tongues Was Minor & Rare

Not Learned

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- It is true that tongues accompanied the initial reception of the Holy Spirit in several cases recorded in Acts. However, this phenomenon is not included in several other stories of people initially receiving the Spirit in Acts, and it would be wrong to assume it occurred when nothing else is said in the entire NT concerning it. Accordingly, when the Apostle Paul speaks rather extensively on the topic of being baptized in the Spirit, he mentions nothing about speaking in tongues.
- Paul stated clearly that not all the Corinthians should even be expected to have the gift of tongues. The Pentecostals have no good answer for that fact. Even more so, the Apostle makes it very clear *in this very chapter* that *all the Corinthian believers had been baptized in the Spirit*
- The Apostle Paul says several things in 1 Corinthians 14 that implies he expected the gift of tongues to be relatively rare.
- The Apostle's statement that, "**I speak in tongues more than all of you** [combined ¹]" (14:18) is additional evidence of the gift's scarcity.
- The reason for its scarcity is that the gift had a very narrow and temporary purpose: It was a miraculous *sign gift* intended to authenticate new divine revelation to the Jews.
- It is safe to say that tongues speaking is a much bigger deal today than it was in the early Church, with the exception of Corinth. And it was the hubbub there for bad reasons, not good ones, which unfortunately would seem to be the case today.
- Some today suggest that one can "learn" to speak in tongues and "classes" are given in order to instruct people on how to receive the "gift."
- Is this how we would expect to receive any other real spiritual *gift* of the Holy Spirit? Is it learning a "trick"?

A) Tongues was a Relatively Minor Gift in the Early Church

A.1) The Apostle devalued it

The Apostle's letters to the Corinthians reveal that they had an unhealthy interest in evaluating one another's spirituality, and a concern with their own spiritual "rank" in the assembly. This is why he specifically reminded them that true spirituality is manifested in love which "**does not envy . . . does not boast . . . is not proud**" (1 Cor 13:4).

More specifically, it will be demonstrated in a subsequent chapter that many of those in the Corinthian church had been converted from the Greek mystery religions in which spontaneous, obscure utterances like modern "tongues" was thought to give a person a particularly high spiritual ranking.¹ The Apostle addresses this problem by exposing the relatively minor value of even the real gift tongues in several ways.

First, he lists some spiritual gifts in order of importance three times, and intentionally places the gift of tongues last in every list (cf. 1 Cor 12:8-10, 28, 30). Accordingly, D. A. Carson comments:

The gift of tongues (and its correlative, the gift of interpretation of tongues, where it is present) is always last. When I compare the New Testament lists of the Apostles I cannot help but notice that although there is some reordering of the entries from list to list, Judas Iscariot is always last (except of course in Acts 1:13, where he is simply omitted).

In light of the sustained downplaying of tongues in [1 Cor] chapter 14, the least that can be said is that even if Paul does not consider tongues to be the least of the spiritual gifts on some absolute scale, it is highly likely he makes it the last entry in each list in 1 Corinthians because his readers were far too prone to exalt this one gift.²

Even Bishop Michael Green, a foremost leader of *glossaism* admits regarding the Apostle's treatment of the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians:

[T]he Apostle was most unwilling to concur with the Corinthians' estimate of it as the best and most valuable of the gifts of the Spirit. It is perhaps not accidental that every time he mentions tongues and their interpretation, they come last on his list, not first, as the Corinthians would undoubtedly have rated them. . . . [I]t is the lowest of the *charismata*. . . .

Be careful not to regard this gift as the mark of super-spirituality on your own part, something that sets you apart. ³

Really? This is a rather amazing contradiction on Dr. Green's part, compared to the glowing benefits he claims for the modern version of "tongues" today, as quoted in chapter 12.1. Among other things, he said:

[T]he gift of tongues opens a new dimension to a man's prayer life. He actually longs to pray whereas before it had been an effort. . . . [T]ongues enables a man to praise God at a depth unknown previously. . . . elates the soul in worship to a remarkable degree [I]t is an undeniable fact that when men receive this gift of tongues they find themselves free to praise and thank and adore and glorify their heavenly Father as never before. In charismatic prayer meetings praise is usually the dominant element; in the run-of-the-mill evangelical prayer meeting this is not normally the case. . . .

Tongues edifies the individual . . . releases the inhibitions which keep us from prayer and praise of God. . . . It can bring a profound sense of the presence of God, and lead, as a result, to a release from tension and worry, and a deepening of love and trust. As the Holy Spirit leads the believer in such prayer, there is often a deep sense of being in harmony with God. . . . Many people find it a real help in bearing physical pain or mental distress. . . .

Perhaps one of its most important uses is in spiritual warfare. When there is an oppressive sense of evil present, when a ministry of deliverance is being engaged in; then prayer in tongues proves to be a powerful instrument for the Lord the Spirit to use. ⁴

Which is it Bishop Green? Is the gift of tongues "the lowest of the *charismata*" as you rightly interpret Paul, or is it all the amazing things you claim. It would seem silly and dishonest to say it is both.

Another way in which the Apostle communicates the secondary nature of the gift of tongues is to repeat the superiority of the gift of prophecy throughout 1 Corinthians 14. Miraculously speaking in foreign languages with interpretation *can* deliver new divine revelation like prophecy, but it requires a second step of interpretation, which is at least one reason Paul tells them "**I would rather have you prophesy**" than "**speak in tongues**" (1 Cor 14:5).

The superiority of the gift of prophecy over tongues is also communicated in his reminder that "**Tongues . . . are a sign, not**

for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers" (14:22). This is important, because the Apostle clearly valued the gifts that edified believers, as he tells them, "**Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church**" (14:12). Paul was obviously not talking about the gift of tongues, as its ability to edify the church was limited compared to prophecy. And the Apostle certainly is not talking about being zealous for a "private prayer language" that only edifies the self (14:4).

Therefore, the Pentecostal theologian J. Rodman Williams is wrong to claim that the Apostle is suggesting in 1 Corinthians 14 that "praising and thanking God in tongues" has "high value," when, in fact, the Apostle says "**the other man is not edified**" (v. 17).⁵ Unlike *glossaism*, the Apostle believed that real spiritual gifts operated in love and for "**the common good**" (1 Cor 12:7), and if something didn't, it not only wasn't great, it wasn't even a gift of the Spirit.

It can also be suggested that the reason the Apostle chooses prophecy to compare with tongues is that he desires prophecy to virtually replace the Corinthians' use of tongues. He makes it clear that there is nothing even the authentic gift of miraculously speaking in foreign languages can do for Gentile believers that the gift of prophecy can't do better. This is even true of effecting unbelievers, as the operation of prophecy in their congregation would have an even greater effect, convincing them, "**God is really among you!**" (14:25), rather than the appearance of madness that would come with the use of tongues.

An additional thing the Apostle does to address those who were conceited about their gift of tongues was to remind them that it is the Holy Spirit that sovereignly distributes the gifts "**just as He determines**" (1 Cor 12:11). There is no room for pride here regarding what gift a person may have because it is just that, a gift! Accordingly, the Apostle ends chapter 12 with some very important rhetorical questions:

**Are all Apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers?
Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do
all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? (12:29-30).**

The answer that Paul obviously anticipates is "No." So the Apostle did not even expect everyone to speak in tongues.⁶

Finally, in answer to the claim in *glossaism* that tongues was such a valuable gift in the early Church, we would mention the relative scarcity of its mention in the NT. If it was so much a part of the lives of early Christians we would expect to see it discussed and even encouraged more in the NT or other early Christian

documents. It is not. It is only mentioned as a matter of early Church history in Mark and Acts, and mentioned in 1 Corinthians only because the Corinthians were *exaggerating* its value. Therefore, its mention here only serves to again illustrate its relative unimportance. All of which we would expect for a gift that was primarily given to miraculously authenticate new divine revelation to the Jews.

Along these lines, Reformed scholar Sinclair Ferguson writes:

Of course, arguments from silence are slippery; but this broader silence, especially in the Pastoral Letters, which were clearly written to regulate post-apostolic church life, does seem to be eloquent of a shift in orientation which had already taken place from the immediacy of tongues and their interpretation to the teaching of the apostolic tradition (cf. I Tim. 1:10-11; 3:9; 4:6; 6:3; 2 Tim. 1:13; 2:15; 3:10 - 4:5; Tit. 1:9; 2:1). It is particularly noteworthy that the Pastoral Letters do not anticipate the necessity of regulating the exercise of such gifts as prophecy and speaking in tongues.⁷

The scarcity of the use of the gift of tongues in early Christian worship is further evidenced by descriptions of early Christian services. For example, Justin Martyr (c. 150) wrote:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in the cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. Then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen [so it is obviously coherent prayer].⁸

If tongues was so vital and common in early Christian worship services, we would expect it in Justin's description of such a service, but there is no mention of tongues here or any of the other things that *charismaticism* in particular deems so necessary to a "spirit-filled" service.

A.2) Pentecostals are wrong to make it a required sign of Spirit baptism

The above also highlights the unbiblical nature of the high praise and great emphasis that tongues receives in *glossaism*, some of which was described in chapter 12.1. We think particularly of the Pentecostal's insistence that tongues demonstrates the baptism of the Spirit, or a special, second blessing of the Spirit. A full discussion of the NT teaching regarding the baptism of the Holy Spirit is beyond the scope of this study, but it is enough now to point out that such teaching disregards the biblical fact that all believers receive the Holy Spirit at the time of conversion (cf. Eph 1:13-14).

It is true that tongues accompanied the initial reception of the Holy Spirit in several cases recorded in Acts (cf. 2:4; 10:44-46; 19:6-7). However, this phenomenon is not included in several other stories of people initially receiving the Spirit in Acts (cf. 2:38-41; 8:14-17; 9:17-18; 13:52), and it would be wrong to assume it occurred when nothing else is said in the entire NT concerning it. Accordingly, when the Apostle Paul speaks rather extensively on the topic of being baptized in the Spirit, he mentions nothing about speaking in tongues (cf. Rom 6:1-11 and Col 2:11ff.)

If a few occurrences of something in Acts is going to be the basis on which we develop doctrine and impose requirements on God's people then why do we no longer cast lots in order to choose leaders (cf. 1:26)? Why doesn't the Spirit consistently manifest Himself in flames of fire and the sound of a rushing wind loud enough to draw thousands of people (cf. 2:1-6)? Christians do not worship today in Jewish temples (cf. 2:46; 3:1) or live communally (cf. 4:32-35). If someone desires to obtain Christian doctrine and practice from something solely mentioned in a book describing a unique and transitional period in God's plan, then at least they should be consistent.

In addition, the Apostle makes it clear in his discussion of tongues in 1 Corinthians that it has nothing to do with the baptism of the Holy Spirit. He stated clearly that not all the Corinthians should even be expected to have the gift of tongues (cf. 12:11, 30). The Pentecostals have no good answer for that fact. Even more so, the Apostle makes it very clear *in this very chapter* that *all the Corinthian believers had been baptized in the Spirit* when he tells them: "**For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free--and we were all given the one Spirit to drink**" (1 Cor 12:13).

Finally, we note that the Apostle tells the Corinthians to "**eagerly desire the greater gifts**" (12:31), and his insistence that such gifts are those that edify the church, clearly suggests he certainly didn't think tongues was one of them.

This has been the historical teaching of the Church as evidenced by the following from Augustine (354–430):

When we laid the hand on these infants, did each one of you look to see whether they would speak with tongues, and, when he saw that they did not speak with tongues, was any of you so wrong-minded as to say, "These have not received the Holy Ghost." . . . If then the witness of the presence of the Holy Ghost be not now given through these miracles, by what is it given, by what does one get to know that he has received the Holy Ghost? Let him question his own heart. If he love his brother, the Spirit of God dwelleth in him.⁹

How then, brethren, because he that is baptized in Christ, and believes on Him, does not speak now in the tongues of all nations, are we not to believe that he has received the Holy Ghost? God forbid that our heart should be tempted by this faithlessness. . . . Since, therefore, the Holy Ghost is even now received by men, some one may say, why is it that no man speaks in the tongues of all nations? Because the Church itself now speaks in the tongues of all nations.¹⁰

Why then is the Holy Spirit given now in such wise, that no one to whom it is given speaks with divers tongues, except because that miracle then prefigured that all nations of the earth should believe, and that thus the gospel should be found to be in every tongue?¹¹

Heresy always hurts, and the claim that only tongues speakers have been baptized with the Holy Spirit is no exception. This teaching has caused a good deal of injury and disappointment to many of God's people who look for a "second experience" to elevate them to some supposed higher level of spirituality. Such insistence on the need to speak in tongues would also seem to make a mockery of the spirituality of many great Christian men and women in the past who did not speak in tongues, not to mention the many who do not today.

B) Tongues was Relatively Rare in the Early Church

B.1) Paul used it more than all the Corinthians combined

The rarity of the gift of tongues in the early Church is obviously related to our discussion above regarding it being a relatively minor

spiritual gift in the early Church. This rarity is evidenced in several ways.

First, in 30 some years of the Church's earliest and most miraculous existence, tongues speaking is only recorded by the careful historian Luke three times. It receives a brief mention in Mark along with other miraculous gifts, and then we read of it in 1 Corinthians only because its pagan counterfeit is disrupting and misleading the saints in Corinth.¹² Still, the Apostle's intention is clearly not to encourage even the use of the authentic gift, but rather to downplay its exaggeration and correct its counterfeiting in Corinth.

Secondly, the Apostle Paul says several things in 1 Corinthians 14 that implies he expected the gift to be relatively rare. In verse 17 he commands that no more than "**two or at the most three**" should exercise it in any one given meeting. Surely his intention was not to "**quench the Spirit**" (1 Thess 5:19 NASB), as he himself had forbid such a thing. The fact is, because of its rather extreme rarity, the Apostle didn't expect more than "**two or at the most three**" to have the gift of tongues.

Also, it would seem that the Apostle's statement that, "**I speak in tongues more than all of you** [combined¹³]" (14:18) is additional evidence of the gift's scarcity. The fact that the Apostle could confidently and truthfully claim that he exercised the authentic gift of tongues more than the whole Corinthian congregation combined, illustrates that he knew the authentic gift was not being exercised very much there.¹⁴ This clearly implies several things.

First, the Apostle knew that most of the tongue utterances in the Corinthian congregation were not the authentic Christian gift, but the pagan variety practiced in the mystery religions of the day which we will discuss further in a subsequent chapter. Secondly, the Apostle's words seem incompatible with the notion of a "prayer language" that anyone can engage in.

Thirdly, the Apostle knew that because of the scarcity of the gift, even if he only exercised it infrequently, it would still be more than what could be produced by the combined Corinthian congregation. This argument is further strengthened by the fact that we have no recorded instance of the Apostle ever speaking in tongues. Likewise, as we pointed out earlier, John Mark was valued by both the Apostles Paul and Peter as a language interpreter in their ministries.¹⁵

B.2) Scarcity in Church history

This scarcity of the gift of tongues in the apostolic Church continued in the subsequent history of the Church, as discussed further elsewhere.¹⁶ For example, the use of “tongues” among the *Montanists* (ca. 170) was condemned as heretical and they were excommunicated from the Christian churches of the time. Bishop Hilary of Poitiers (c. 315-367) wrote in his treatise *On the Trinity*:

The gift of the Spirit is manifest . . . where there is . . . the gift of healings . . . or by the working of miracles . . . or by prophecy . . . or by discerning of spirits . . . or by kinds of tongues, that the speaking in tongues may be bestowed as a sign of the gift of the Holy Spirit; or by the interpretation of tongues. . . .

Verily how rare and hard to attain are such spiritual gifts!¹⁷

While he obviously admitted the existence of these gifts in the Church, he certainly did not think they were common.

By the end of the fourth century, the consensus of the early Church was that the biblical gift of tongues was something that occurred in the remote past. Accordingly, Dr. E. G. Hinson, a Professor of Church History, did a thorough study of the tongues phenomena and concluded:

Glossolalia has not enjoyed wide currency until recent times. The first sixteen centuries of its history were lean ones indeed. Although we find several references in the early Fathers, they leave us in little doubt about the apparent insignificance of tongues in their day. . . .

Then, if the first five centuries were lean, the next were starvation years for the practice in Western Christendom and doubtful ones in Eastern Christendom. The few scattered references to it are dubious in themselves and made even more dubious by the characteristic credulity [gullibility] of the Middle Ages.¹⁸

The reason for its scarcity is, again, obvious. The gift had a very narrow and temporary purpose: It was a miraculous *sign gift* intended to authenticate new divine revelation to the Jews. Such a gift would understandably only be needed in relatively rare occasions, and Luke’s account of it in Acts reflects this. The NT witness and Church history both substantiate the view reflected by Drs. Robertson and Plummer in their highly regarded commentary on 1 Corinthians, that speaking in tongues “were to a large extent abnormal and transitory [not being] part of the regular development of the Christian church.”¹⁹

Not surprisingly, *glossaists* attempt to suggest the gift of tongues operated in the early Church to the degree it is claimed to operate among them today. This, in spite of the fact, that there would seem to be a decreasing regularity of those claiming to exercise the gift of tongues even in *glossaism*. Walter J. Hollenweger, a recognized expert on the history of Pentecostalism, wrote in 1997 that a study of the frequency of tongues concluded that, "only 35% of all members of Pentecostal churches have practiced the gift [of tongues] either initially or as an ongoing experience."²⁰

Nonetheless, Pentecostal scholar Gordon Fee suggests that when the Apostle told the Romans "**the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express**" (Rom 8:26) that the Apostle was describing the gift of tongues and implying it was the common practice of Christians in that day. He goes on to write:

What needs to be addressed, finally, is whether "praying in tongues" was as common a phenomenon in the early churches as this interpretation implies, since the assumption is that this is how the Romans would have understood [Paul's statement].

. . .

This is moot, of course, but silence about it in the other Pauline letters, at least in the language of "speaking in tongues," counts for little; few NT scholars, one needs to be reminded, would believe that the Lord's Table was celebrated in the Pauline churches were it not for the abuse of it in Corinth. This text [Rom 8:26] seems to suggest the same was generally true about speaking in tongues, namely, that it was the common, everyday experience of the early churches to pray in this manner, which we learn about chiefly because it was abused in the gatherings of God's people in Corinth.

That Paul prayed in this way more than even the Corinthians indicates that this was a regular part of his own personal spirituality; it is difficult to imagine, given the otherwise generally phenomenological approach to the presence of the Spirit described throughout the NT, that he was alone in this in the early church.²¹

We will deal with the proper interpretation of Romans 8:26 elsewhere, but suffice it to say here that Dr. Fee is on very shaky ground to claim so much about the statement. Secondly, he is wrong to suggest that there is little evidence to "believe that the Lord's Table was celebrated in the Pauline churches were it not for the abuse of it in Corinth." Along the same lines, the *glossaist* Dr. Storms writes, "the Lord's Supper is [only] explicitly mentioned in

the [NT] letters only in 1 Corinthians. Surely no one would conclude that it was infrequently observed or obsolete.”²² On the contrary, the Lord’s Supper is *commanded* in all four Gospels, which makes it certain it was practiced faithfully in the NT Church, and this very thing is evidenced in second and third century Christian literature. None of these is true of the gift of tongues.

Finally, contrary to Dr. Fee, we have already noted that the Apostle’s claim that he exercised the real gift of tongues more than all the Corinthians combined is a clear reflection of its great rarity, not its regularity. And as we discuss further elsewhere, Dr. Fee is simply assuming that the gift of tongues operated in the Apostle’s life as, “a regular part of his own personal spirituality.” While this reflects what he is trying to prove, it is contradictory to the biblical attributes of the gift of tongues as most clearly described in the book of Acts and 1 Corinthians 14:22.

Accordingly, it is safe to say that tongues speaking is a much bigger deal today than it was in the early Church, with the exception of Corinth. And it was the hubbub there for bad reasons, not good ones, which unfortunately would seem to be the case today.

C) Tongues was a Spiritual Gift, Not a Learned Human Skill

Some today suggest that one can “learn” to speak in tongues. Accordingly, “classes” are regularly held in churches in order to instruct people on how to receive the “gift.” A typical seminar designed to instruct people how to “get” the supposed gift of tongues may include “jumpstarting” the people emotionally by getting them to shout prayers and praise. Sample syllables are suggested to practice on, and students are encouraged to repeat “funny little sounds.” When gibberish comes out, possibly because the student is reluctant to disappoint his or her “teacher,” it is claimed that the student has received the gift of tongues or even the Holy Spirit. For an example of someone attempting to teach his listeners to speak in tongues see online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eza0vRXpXM>.

Accordingly, George Gardiner, an ex-Pentecostal minister who spent 22 years in *glossaism*, has written:

Give me any group of people who will do what I say, who will go through the ritual and do it with sincerity, and, in a matter of time, I will have them all speaking in ecstatic speech.²³

Likewise, regarding one rather famous couple in *glossaism* we read:

For Dennis and Rita Bennett . . . the initial experience of glossolalia should always be cultivated so that the first "utterances" grow, ultimately, into a "language" for prayer:

"If it were true that most believers only prayed in tongues once, at the time of receiving the Holy Spirit, and perhaps never again, or very rarely, it would be of paramount importance to be sure that those first utterances were totally inspired by the Spirit, and not human effort [Amen]. We are teaching, however, what we know to be true, that these first efforts at obeying the Spirit [!?] are only the beginning. It doesn't matter if the first sounds are just "priming the pump," for the real flow will assuredly come. . . . Keep on with those sounds. Offer them to God. . . . As you do, they will develop and grow into a fully developed language." ²⁴

This is worse than silly. It is an offensive fraud in God's own house.

The respected NT scholar F. F. Bruce (1910-1990) notes the medical reason that anyone can learn the modern version of tongues when he writes:

Utterance in languages not normally used by the speakers [occurs] as a result of appropriate stimulation of what since 1861 has been known as 'Broca's area', the centre for articulate speech in the third frontal convolution of the dominant cerebral hemisphere. ²⁵

O.K. In other words, the brain is capable of producing such gibberish.

Likewise, in his well known study on the tongues phenomenon, the highly respected linguist W. J. Samarin concluded:

[I]t has already been established that no special power needs to take over a person's vocal organs; all of us are equipped with everything we need to produce glossolalia. . . . Glossolalia is not a supernatural phenomenon. . . . It is similar to many other kinds of speech humans produce in more or less normal circumstances, in more or less normal psychological states. In fact, anybody can produce glossolalia if he is uninhibited and if he discovers what the 'trick' is. ²⁶

Is this how we would expect to receive any other real spiritual *gift* of the Holy Spirit? Is it learning a "trick"?

This kind of thing is not new, however. Many years ago, the Church leader Irenaeus (c. 170) in his book *Against Heresies*, wrote

of a false apostle named Markus who deceived people into receiving spiritual gifts in much the same way. Irenaeus wrote:

It appears probable enough that this man possesses a demon as his familiar spirit, by means of whom he seems able to prophesy, and also enables as many as he counts worthy to be partakers of his Charis [gift] themselves to prophesy. He devotes himself especially to women, and those such as are well-bred, and elegantly attired, and of great wealth, whom he frequently seeks to draw after him, by addressing them in such seductive words as these:

"I am eager to make thee a partaker of my Charis . . . Receive first from me and by me [the gift of] Charis. . . . Behold Charis has descended upon thee; open thy mouth and prophesy."

On the woman replying, "I have never at any time prophesied, nor do I know how to prophesy;" then engaging, for the second time, in certain invocations, so as to astound his deluded victim, he says to her, "Open thy mouth, speak whatsoever occurs to thee, and thou shalt prophesy." She then, vainly puffed up and elated by these words, and greatly excited in soul by the expectation that it is herself who is to prophesy, her heart beating violently, reaches the requisite pitch of audacity, and idly as well as impudently utters some nonsense as it happens to occur to her, such as might be expected from one heated by an empty spirit.

Henceforth she reckons herself a prophetess, and expresses her thanks to Marcus for having imparted to her of his own Charis. She then makes the effort to reward him, not only by the gift of her possessions (in which way he has collected a very large fortune), but also by yielding up to him her person, desiring in every way to be united to him, that she may become altogether one with him. ²⁷

The parallels to what occurs in many "Christian" settings today is obvious, and it is just as obvious that the early Christians condemned such a practice.

The spiritual gift of tongues was not known in the early Church as something that should or could be learned. Accordingly, the fifth century Church leader, Bishop Theodoret (393-466) wrote in his *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*:

In former times those who accepted the divine preaching and who were baptized for their salvation were given visible signs of the grace of the Holy Spirit at work in them. Some spoke in tongues which they did not know and which nobody had

taught them, while others performed miracles or prophesied.
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Likewise, we have already quoted Augustine as saying: "In the earliest time, 'the Holy Ghost fell upon them that believed; and they spoke with tongues,' which they had not learned, 'as the Spirit gave them utterance.'" ²⁹

The bottom line is that an authentic gift of the Holy Spirit is not received or imparted by learning it. On the contrary, the Apostle wrote they, "**are the work of one and the same Spirit, and He gives them to each one, just as He determines.**" (1 Cor 12:11), not as we will or work. Nor is it up to us to choose what gift we have, as in the context of the distribution of spiritual gifts, the Apostle says, "**God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be**" (12:18). Accordingly, it is obvious that those who are recorded as speaking in tongues in the book of Acts did not learn their gift. It is doubtful they even knew such a gift was available.

The Greek word *charisma* used to describe spiritual gifts is also used to describe salvation (e.g. Rom 6:23). We can do nothing to humanly acquire salvation, it is wholly a work of God and the same is true of spiritual gifts. This is not to say that the spiritual gifts we have received cannot be *developed* further by our effort. But the initial granting and distribution of them is solely the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. The gift of tongues was supernatural, something humans could not produce themselves, contrary to what is suggested by the instruction received in *glossaism*.

The fact that tongues, or any other authentic spiritual gift, is given according to the Spirit's sovereign choice also argues against the common encouragement to "seek after" the gift of tongues. Again, like any work of God's grace, "**It does not . . . depend on man's desire or effort**" (Rom 9:16). Any references in 1 Corinthians that could be interpreted as saying such a thing, needs to be understood in a corporate sense, not an individual one.

Therefore, when the Apostle says, "**eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy**" (1 Cor 14:1) he is telling the Corinthians to desire that *someone* in their congregation will have the gift of prophecy, not that they should all seek to have it themselves. The *glossaist* perspective on individually seeking tongues reflects the kind of unbiblical individualism that both the Corinthians and many Christians suffer from today, and which the Apostle was attempting to correct in this passage, especially in his analogy of the body (cf. 1 Cor 12:11-31). ³⁰

The fact that you can "learn" the modern version of tongues is yet one more indication that it does not match the biblical attributes

of the gift of tongues. Along these lines, the following from D. M. Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981), although written several years ago, is still very appropriate and insightful, and worth its length. Although he was actually quite open to the continuing occurrence of the miraculous gifts, he wrote:

[Regarding] the phenomenon of speaking with tongues . . . one cannot help noticing that this only tends to appear when it is talked or preached about, or when it is suggested in some shape or form. There is a most interesting piece of evidence on this very matter.

Some of you may remember a book published several years back called *This is That*. It was an account of the remarkable revival that broke out in the Congo. (Incidentally one cannot but feel that God blessed those people at that time in that way because of what happened to them afterwards. Revivals often come like that to prepare people. It was given in Korea in exactly the same way.)

This book tells how this great revival broke out, but there was no manifestation of speaking in tongues except in stations where the subject had already been mentioned and dealt with. In stations where the people had never heard about speaking in tongues, there was no speaking in tongues. This fact was confirmed to me by one of the men most involved in the revival, Mr. Ivor Davies. He confirmed that tongues only appeared where they were spoken about.

Surely our suspicions should already be aroused. Or put it another way. If we find that people tend to speak in tongues only as the result of contact with a particular person, preacher or teacher, our suspicions should once more be aroused, because you again have this possibility of suggestion and hypnotic power. . . . If you find this particular phenomenon only occurring as the result of some suggestion or teaching or as the result of the activities of certain particular individuals, then you are fully entitled to be cautious and even suspicious. It is in the sovereignty of the Spirit and he can give and withhold as he pleases. But obviously, if the suggestion is made that all who have the baptism of the Spirit must speak in tongues and this is repeated and repeated, it is not surprising that people begin to speak in tongues. But the question then arises as to what they are doing. . . .

[W]hen I read something like this [about "learning" how to speak in tongues] (as I do so often in various journals) I am in an entirely different position. This is the teaching: 'Do you want to speak in tongues? 'Very well,' they say, 'this is what you have got to do; surrender your jaw and your tongue-let

them go.' This is no laughing matter, my friends, the thing is too serious. There are people being led astray by such teaching today. 'Then,' they continue, 'then begin to utter sounds, any sort of sound, it doesn't matter whether it has sense or meaning or not; utter any sound that offers itself to you and go on doing that. And if you keep on doing it you will find yourself speaking in tongues.'

And the simple answer is you probably will, but it will have nothing to do with the Holy Spirit. I do not hesitate to say that. Where is there any suggestion whatsoever that we have to do things like this in the New Testament? . . . Now I am not querying their motives; I know they are honest, and that their motives are good; what I am saying is that they are not only unscriptural, they are also putting themselves into the hands not only of the psychologists but perhaps even of evil spirits.

You must do nothing at all. The Spirit gives these gifts 'severally to every man as he will'. That is the statement: 'All these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will' (I Cor 12:11). If I am going to give somebody a gift, I do not want any help from them. But that is what people are being taught to do at the present time, as if the Holy Spirit cannot decide, and cannot do it in and of himself. He does not need your help! The moment you begin to try to induce a gift you are acting psychologically; indeed, as I have said, you may be handing yourself over to evil spirits.³¹

It is our hope that the warnings of this great Bible scholar will be taken more seriously by sincere Christians in our own day.

Extras & Endnotes

Devotion to Dad

Our Father in Heaven, we pray for our brothers and sisters who have been duped by false teachers about the baptism of Your Spirit. We are concerned about how such a lie would affect their relationship with You and ask You to set them free from it and expose the fraud of those teaching such harmful lies.

Gauging Your Grasp

- 1) What are several ways the Paul implied the relatively minor value of even the real gift tongues in 1 Corinthians 12-14?
- 2) What biblical and historical evidence do we provide to support our claim that the Pentecostal teaching on the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a harmful lie? Do you agree or disagree and why?
- 3) What are some ways that Paul implied the scarcity of the real gift tongues in 1 Corinthians 12-14?
- 4) Why would the real gift of tongues be so rare?
- 5) What are the problems with claiming that the gift of tongues can be learned?

Publications & Particulars

¹ For support of the fact that modern tongues practices were rather identical to non-Christian worship practices in first century pagan mystery religions see section 12.7.A.

² D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Baker, 1987), 36.

³ Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (Eerdmans, 2004), 208, 251, 252.

⁴ Green, 198-200.

⁵ J. Rodman Williams, "The Greater Gifts," in *Charismatic Experiences in History*, Cecil M. Robeck ed. (Hendrickson, 1985), 51.

⁶ Not surprisingly, the Pentecostal Dr. Fee claims that all the Corinthian "believers could potentially" speak in tongues. This would be a necessary claim on the part of Pentecostals who believe that tongues is the sign of being baptized with the Holy Spirit. Dr. Fee writes:

The "wish" in 14:5 that all speak in tongues (apparently "privately" is intended) and the imperative of 14:1, "eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy," plus the statement in 14:31 that "all may prophesy," suggest that such gifts are potentially available to all (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians (NICNT)* [Eerdmans, 1987], 623).

There are several problems with this view. First, it contradicts the Apostle's clear statement in 12:29-30 that *not all would be* "**Apostles . . . prophets . . . teachers**" or "**work miracles . . . have gifts of healing . . . speak in tongues** [or] . . . interpret [tongues]." For Dr.

Fee's view to be tenable, he must be prepared to say that the Apostle thought all the Corinthians *could be* Apostles or teachers or miracle workers (cf. 12:29-30) as well. Surely he wouldn't make that case, and so he shouldn't do it for the gift of tongues either. Therefore, contrary to Dr. Fee, such gifts as prophecy and tongues *are not* "potentially available to all."

Secondly, to claim that God would give all Christians the same gift, including tongues, makes the Apostle's whole argument about the diversity of the body in chapter 12 become meaningless (cf. vs. 17-20). There he makes it clear that if a body of Christ all had the same gift, it would be ugly and useless, something which *Glossaists* churches should ponder more seriously. Therefore, neither does 14:1 suggest that all could be expected to have the gift of prophecy.

Thirdly, we suggest elsewhere regarding 14:5, Paul's use of "**wish** [*thelō*]" means "a wish unlikely to be fulfilled (cf. 7:7)." (cf. section 12.12.A).

Finally, the statement that "**you can all prophesy**" (14:31) is couched in a fuller context in which the Apostle is specifically addressing the *prophets* in the congregation, not the Corinthians as a whole:

Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you [prophets] can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. (1 Cor 14:29-31)

For further discussion of these issues see chapter 12.12.

⁷ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Intervarsity, 1996), 231

⁸ Justin Martyr, *Apology I*, 67; online at www.ccel.org

⁹ Augustine, *Homily on the Epistle of St. John*, 6.10; online at www.ccel.org.

¹⁰ Augustine, *On the Gospel of St. John*, 32.7; online at www.online.ccel.org

¹¹ Augustine, *The Answer to the Letters of Peilian the Donatist*, 2.32.74; online at www.ccel.org

¹² Other supposed mentions of tongues in Scripture are dealt with in chapter 12.12.

¹³ The Greek word for "**all**" here is the plural form of *pas*, which the *NIDNTT* says is used when, "stress [is] laid on the group as a whole" instead of "each of the many individuals." (*New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Colin Brown, ed., 4 vols., [Zondervan, 1986], 1:94). Thus, the insertion "combined" (cf. 1 Cor 12:26a, 14:23 where the plural forms of *pas* are also used).

¹⁴ NT scholar Anthony Thiselton suggests the rather novel idea that the Apostle is expressing his superiority in the gift in a "*qualitative* rather than a *quantitative*" way. In other words, the Apostle's superiority is "not the sheer frequency of the use of the gift" (*The First Epistle to the*

Corinthians [Eerdmans, 2000], 1117).

However, Dr. Thiselton does not, probably because he cannot, explain how the gift of tongues could be so evidently qualitatively superior to that of another, completely apart from the frequency with which God gives it to them. How could you *miraculously* speak in a real foreign human language better than someone else? Even in light of Dr. Thiselton's view of tongues as a private, "unconscious language" of prayer, how could you do such a thing better, without doing it more often?

Dr. Thiselton's view would also seem to miss the meaning of *pas* ("all") here as noted above. While it could be said that he spoke in tongues more frequently than all the Corinthians combined, it would be nonsense to say this about a qualitative sense. Finally, if the Apostle had meant a qualitative sense instead of a quantitative one, we might have expected the Greek word *kreissōn* "better," instead of *mallon* "more," which the Apostle does in this very epistle (cf. 7:9, 38; 11:17).

Dr. Fee recognizes that the Apostle is speaking of the regularity of his gift of tongues, but claims Paul's statement that "**I speak in tongues more than all of you** [combined]" is "somewhat hyperbolic. . . . After all, one may legitimately ask how he knew, to which the answer would be that he probably didn't." (*First Corinthians*, 674). In essence, Dr. Fee is accusing the Apostle of lying. Either the Apostle spoke "**in tongues more than all**" the Corinthians combined, or he didn't, and if he didn't than he is being dishonest just to make a very serious point.

Still, Dr. Fee suggests that the Apostle's preface to this claim, "**I thank God**" is probably something of a mild oath, a way of calling on God to witness to the absolute truthfulness of what follows (cf. his use of "**I tell the truth, I am not lying**" in Gal 1:20; Rom 9:1; 1 Tim 2:7; cf. also 2 Cor 1:23; 11:10). (Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* [Hendrickson, 1994], 234, n. 614)

¹⁵ Regarding the fact that John Mark was valued by both the Apostles Paul and Peter as a language interpreter in their ministries see section 12.3.C.2

¹⁶ For the history of tongues in the Church see chapter 12.13.

¹⁷ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, viii.30, 34; cf. 33, online at www.ccel.org.

¹⁸ Hinson, 57.

¹⁹ A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, ICC, 2nd ed., (1914), 257.

²⁰ Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism* (Hendrickson, 1997), 223. We do not know when the study was taken, but even if it was several years ago, we doubt the percentages have increased from earlier Pentecostalism, and probably have, in fact, decreased.

²¹ Fee, *Presence*, 585.

²² C. Samuel Storms in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?*, Wayne Grudem ed. (Zondervan, 1998), 220.

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- ²³ Quoted by Erroll Hulse, "the Charismatic Experience" http://www.the-highway.com/charismatic1_Hulse.html
- ²⁴ Richard Quebedeaux, *The New Charismatics: The Origins, Development, and Significance of Neo-Pentecostalism* (Doubleday, 1976), 128.
- ²⁵ F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Corinthians* (Oliphants, 1971), 117
- ²⁶ W. J. Samarín, *Tongues of Men and Angels: The Religious Language of Pentecostalism* (Collier-Macmillan, 1972), 91, 277,
- ²⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I.13.3, online at [ww.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org).
- ²⁸ Bishop Theodoret, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, online at www.ccel.org.
- ²⁹ Augustine, *Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, Vol. VII of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, (The Christian Literature Co. 1888), VI. 10., (Underlining added for emphasis).
- ³⁰ On 1 Corinthians 14:1 Joseph Dillow points out that the Greek verb here (*diokete*) translated "**pursue**" in the NASB is in the plural form here "indicating that Paul is exhorting the church as a whole (plural) instead of directing himself to the individuals within it (the singular probably would have been used). He simply is charging the church to pray that God would send them men who have the greater gifts in order that they may be a complete church." (*Speaking in Tongues* [Zondervan, 1975], 70). See also endnote above regarding the claim that all Christians could potentially have the gift of tongues or prophecy.
- Interpreting the Apostle's encouragement as applying to the church as a whole instead of individuals corrects Dr. Fee who writes, "By the same reasoning that puts tongues as the least, "Apostles" should be the "greater" gift, yet all are agreed that this is the one gift that none of them may properly "eagerly desire" (*Presence*, 195). Exactly, and why Apostleship really was one of the greater gifts and the Corinthians as a whole should be desiring it.
- ³¹ D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Sovereign Spirit: Discerning the Gifts* (Harold Shaw, 1985), 99-101, 135-6.