

## Seeking to Apply God's Word to Our Lives

# Tongues

Many churches today endorse corporately speaking in tongues and using private prayer languages. This paper seeks to answer the following questions: What were tongues? What was the purpose of tongues? How were tongues supposed to be used in the early church? Do tongues exist today?

### What were tongues?

Tongues were the God given ability for a believer to speak in a known language that he had not previously been able to speak (Acts 2:1-11). Each tongue represented a language that was clear and meaningful (1 Corinthians 14:7-11). Several observations indicate that tongues were not a spiritual gift:

1. Tongues were not referred to as a “spiritual gift.”<sup>1</sup>
2. Tongues were called a sign, not to those who believed, but to unbelievers (1 Corinthians 14:22).
3. In order for tongues to be edifying in the congregation, it required another person who could interpret (1 Corinthians 14:28, 5). Spiritual gifts are not dependent upon another person's involvement.
4. Tongues were to be limited in their use. Only two or at the most three were to speak in tongues (1 Corinthians 14:27). Nowhere in the New Testament do you find today's spiritual gifts being limited in their use.

### What was the purpose of tongues?

Although tongues were a manifestation of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:7), they were not a spiritual gift. Tongues fulfilled two main purposes:

1. Tongues were a sign of the initial indwelling of the Holy Spirit – The Book of Acts records three occasions in which different groups of believers corporately experienced tongues as a sign of the indwelling Holy Spirit:
  - The day of Pentecost in which the early Jewish church received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-17a).
  - The event in which the Holy Spirit first indwelt the Gentile members of the church (Acts 10:1-48).
  - The occasion in which several disciples, familiar only with the baptism of John, were indwelt with the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:1-7).

Once these three groups had initially received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, this first purpose for tongues was fulfilled.

2. Tongues were a sign to the unbelieving Jews of impending judgment – Shortly after these three groups had initially received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul disclosed the second purpose of tongues. In 1 Corinthians 14:21-22a, he wrote:

*“In the Law it is written, ‘By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to Me,’ says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers...”*

In these verses, Paul quoted directly from Isaiah 28:11. In this Old Testament passage, God condemned Ephraim for their rebellion (Isaiah 28:1-9) and pronounced judgment upon them (Isaiah 28:10-13). Isaiah prophesied that God would send a foreign people that spoke “*through stammering lips and a foreign tongue*” (Isaiah 28:11), and these people would break Ephraim and take them captive (Isaiah 28:13). This prophecy was fulfilled when Assyria took Israel captive in 722 BC.

Tongues served much the same purpose in New Testament times. During His last days upon earth, Jesus condemned the Jews for not recognizing the time of His visitation (Luke 19:44b). He prophesied that God's judgment would come upon Jerusalem when armies would, “*throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another*”

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<sup>1</sup> Nowhere do you find the phrase “spiritual gift of tongues.” In the three passages in which tongues are listed with spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:10, 28, 30), the Greek grammar clearly separates tongues from the spiritual gifts mentioned.

(Luke 19:43- 44a). Paul's quote of Isaiah 28:11 signified that tongues were a sign of God's impending judgment upon Jerusalem. When Jesus' prophecy of Jerusalem's destruction was fulfilled, by Rome in 70 A.D., this second purpose for tongues was fulfilled, and tongues soon ceased by themselves (1 Corinthians 13:8).

3. While tongues fulfilled these two purposes above, they could also edify believers – Tongues were to be used in the congregation only when it edified the body (1 Corinthians 14:5, 6, 12, 26). Edification occurred only when the tongue was interpreted (1 Corinthians 12:10, 14:5, 26-28). This resulted in the congregation receiving revelation, knowledge, prophecy, or teaching (1 Corinthians 14:5-6).

### **How were tongues supposed to be used in the early church?**

While tongues still existed, they were only to be used when it resulted in edification (1 Corinthians 14:5, 6, 12, 26). The believer who spoke in a tongue often did not understand the language he was speaking. In order for a tongue to be edifying, it required interpretation (1 Corinthians 12:10, 14:5, 26-28). If anyone spoke during a service, it was to *“be by two or at most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret”* (1 Corinthians 14:27). If there was no one to interpret the tongue, the person wishing to speak in a tongue was to remain quiet. He was to silently speak to himself and God (1 Corinthians 14:28).

Paul gave clear instructions concerning corporately praying in tongues. He explained that when a person prayed in a tongue, his spirit prayed but his mind was unfruitful (1 Corinthians 14:14). Because the Holy Spirit never produces an unfruitful mind (Galatians 5:22-23, Ephesians 5:11), Paul exhorted the Corinthians to pray with their spirit and their mind also (1 Corinthians 14:15). If the interpretation of a tongue was unavailable, Paul did not want the Corinthians to pray in tongues (1 Corinthians 14:16-17). Every verse that speaks of an individual praying in a tongue is in the context of the congregation (1 Corinthians 14:14-15) and for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7).

### **Conclusion:**

Tongues, as described in the New Testament, do not exist today. Tongues fulfilled two main purposes during the early church. First, tongues served as a sign of the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit within different groups of believers. Second, tongues served as a sign to unbelieving Jews of God's impending judgment of Jerusalem. While these purposes were still being fulfilled, tongues could also edify the church. When God's judgment of Jerusalem was completed, in 70 A.D., the last purpose for tongues was fulfilled, and tongues soon ceased by themselves. The ecstatic speech spoken in churches and during personal prayer do not conform to the biblical definition of tongues nor the biblical instructions for its usage.

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