

The Gift of Tongues

Sunday 23rd May 2021

Key Scriptures

- Acts 2:1–13
- 1 Corinthians 12:30; 13:1; 14:1–18

Summary

Before he ascended, Jesus said to his disciples, “I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). On the day of Pentecost we find the disciples doing just that, all together, waiting (Acts 2:1). Supernatural events precede the Holy Spirit’s arrival: a sound like a violent wind, tongues of fire. And miraculous events follow: speaking in other tongues, hearing in native languages. The Holy Spirit now dwells in the disciples and they are glorifying Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit.

There has been much contention over the gift of tongues. Some people try to minimise the extent of the Holy Spirit’s gift of tongues, stating that it must be only languages that are spoken in the world, or that it was only for a specific time that has now passed. The biblical text does not impose this limitation. In Acts 2 the Greek word *glossa*, meaning tongue or language, is used of both the fire and the disciples Spirit enabled speech, this word does not preclude the language being a heavenly language. In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul reinforces that speaking in other tongues (*glossa*) is unintelligible, suggesting the language is unknown.

Others have sought to elevate the gift too highly, requiring people to speak it to demonstrate they are filled with the Spirit. This also is not supported by the biblical text. In 1 Corinthians 12:30 Paul asks the rhetorical question “do all speak in tongues?” to reinforce his earlier statements that the gifts are distributed as the Holy Spirit decides (1 Cor 12:11) and therefore different people have different gifts.

The disciples appeared to some as “drunk on new wine.” Something about their speaking in other tongues was giving this impression, perhaps those who thought this couldn’t understand the language being spoken. For other people there was a miracle of hearing, each person hearing in their native language. Later on, Peter confirms the truth of what is happening by sharing the prophecy from Joel. The Holy Spirit has been poured out on God’s people and they are now operating in the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul states, ‘anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit’ (1 Cor 14:2). The speaking of mysteries by the Spirit, certainly sounds like unintelligible heavenly language. Paul continues in this chapter to reinforce this aspect of the gift of tongues. It is this particular aspect of the gift that directs its use towards private prayer, although, not exclusively so. The gift of tongues may be used in public but there should be an interpretation to make the words intelligible.

When we receive the gift of tongues we receive the ability to speak in another language, usually a heavenly language, occasionally an earthly one. It is not about being taken over by the Spirit, rather, it is the invitation of the Holy Spirit to speak in a language he gives us. We remain completely alert and in control of when we start and stop speaking. Just like any language, we learn to speak through practice. The Holy Spirit gives us the language and we learn to speak it. Whether this gift is used in private prayer, in gathered worship, or spoken publicly, it is always to be used to glorify Jesus.

Questions/Actions

1. Share your experiences of the gift of tongues. Have you heard it used? Have you received this gift?
2. How do you feel about the gift of tongues? Is it a gift you would like to receive?
3. Have you felt pressure to receive the gift of tongues or felt inferior because you don't have it? There are many gifts and tongues is only one of them. The Holy Spirit dwells in **every** follower of Jesus and gives gifts as he determines. If you feel able, share your experience and pray with others for healing from past hurt, and ask God for confidence that the Holy Spirit dwells in you and gives you gifts to glorify Jesus.
4. If you would like to receive the gift of tongues, ask the Holy Spirit for it and try speaking. Don't worry if you don't receive it. You can have confidence that the Holy Spirit will equip you with all the gifts you need for all that he calls you to.