I. Introduction

“This is obviously the ‘controversial gift,’ both then and now.”

II. The Gift of Tongues

A. Key Definitions

Modern charismatic definitions emphasize two things about tongues: 1) it is a prayer language and 2) it may be ecstatic speech that is not a foreign language. Most argue that tongues can be private and therefore do not need to be interpreted.

Charismatic definition: “Speaking in tongues is prayer or praise spoken in syllables not understood by the speaker.”

Pentecostal application: The Assemblies of God believe, “Speaking in tongues is the initial physical evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit.”

A proposed definition: Tongues were the miraculous Spirit-enabled ability to speak an unlearned language that is known by others on earth for the purpose of exalting Christ and building up others, while pronouncing judgment on Israel. This was a critical gift for laying the foundation of the church, and, as such, has ceased.

“Many people claim to speak in tongues today, but we have to ask whether what they are doing matches the gift we find in the Bible.”

B. Key Terms

“Tongues” is an unfortunate rendering of the Greek word γλῶσσα (glossa). Glossa occurs 114 times in the scripture and never refers to unintelligible speech. It always refers to the organ of the tongue or speech (i.e., a spoken language). Thus, references both in Acts and 1 Corinthians 12–14 refer, not to a private prayer phenomenon, but a gift of languages, involving human earthly languages.

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C. Key Texts

1. Acts 2:4–11
   a. It is clearly human languages (2:6, 8, 11).
   b. It was not a miraculous gift of “hearing” but of “speaking” (2:4, 6).
   c. This “is the only passage in the entire Bible which directly describes the gift of tongues. Therefore, this passage should be determinative for the nature of ‘speaking in tongues’ by the Holy Spirit.”

2. Acts 10:1–48, esp vs. 46
   a. Cornelius and his friends spoke in languages they didn’t know.
   b. Why did this happen? Peter describes the event in 10:46 as an extension of Pentecost. Acts 11:15–17 “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning. 16 “And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ 17 “Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?”
   c. Acts 10–11 describe a transitional event that is unique in the development of the church.
   d. “Luke explains in Acts 10–11 that Gentiles were to receive the new covenant blessings directly on exactly the same terms as did believing Jews (cf. Eph. 2–3). No longer were the Gentiles to be second-class citizens, as they had been under the old covenant.”

   b. “The best view of the condition of the Ephesian disciples is that they were Old Testament saints, believers who had progressed…no further than the ministry of John the Baptist. They were like Apollos in that they knew only the baptism of John.”

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c. There is no contextual reason to understand “tongues” differently in Acts 19:6 than in Acts 2 or 10. In all the Acts passages, it is foreign languages.

d. Why? The “people spoke in foreign languages as an important sign to the Jews that God was now working through the international church instead of through the nation of Israel.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCRIPTURE</th>
<th>SITUATION</th>
<th>PURPOSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Acts 2</td>
<td>Day of Pentecost</td>
<td>To show the Jews that God was beginning a new international body, the church.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Acts 8</td>
<td>Samaritans</td>
<td>To show the Jews that Samaritans were to be in the church on an equal basis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Acts 10</td>
<td>Gentiles</td>
<td>To show the Jews that Gentiles were to be in the church on an equal basis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Acts 19</td>
<td>John’s disciples</td>
<td>To show the Jews that OT saints in special situations were to come into the church on an equal basis.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

4. 1 Corinthians 12:10, 28, 30; 13:1, 8; 14:2, 4–6, 9, 13–14, 18–19, 21–23, 26–27, 39

These three chapters of 1 Corinthians are commonly referenced to claim tongues as a form of “ecstatic speech,” “angelic language,” or “prayer language.”

a. “Despite its length, the passage does not state explicitly what the tongues are.”

b. Paul’s purpose in these chapters is to discuss the use of prophecy and tongues in the gathering of the church.

c. Chap 12—The Corinthians were prone to exalt the gift of tongues which was dividing the church. He gives a strong appeal for unity amidst diversity. All members are vital to the health of the body. Paul reframes their thinking by listing tongues last (1 Cor 12:30)

d. Chap 13—Paul’s whole point is that love is superior to the gifts.

e. Chap 14—“The purpose of the chapter was not to give details on the practice of non-language utterances and trances (whether private or public practice), but just the opposite: intelligibility and orderliness must characterize Christian worship gatherings.”

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9 Edgar, “*Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit*,” 134.
f. Note the careful restrictions (1 Cor 14:26–33): the overarching theme of this chapter isn’t in support of tongues but to limit tongues.

1) It must be for ordered edification (vs. 26)

2) There must not be more than two or three in any service (vs. 27)

3) One must interpret (vs. 27)

4) The speaker must keep silent in the absence of an interpreter (vs. 28)

5) Others must judge the content (vs. 29)

6) The speaker must sit down and remain silent if another receives a fresh revelation while he is speaking (vs. 30)

7) Each must speak one at a time (vs. 31)

8) The gathering is to be well-ordered (vv. 12, 40)

“He will argue for intelligibility and order in the worship service, since that is the prerequisite to edification, which is the goal of gathering.”

D. Key Questions:

1. Why did tongues exist?

   a. A sign to edify the early NT church (1 Cor 12:7; cf. 1 Pet 4:10–11)

   “Neither at Corinth nor on the Day of Pentecost is speaking in tongues presented as the overcoming of a communications barrier…The New Testament presents glossolalia primarily as a convincing miracle, only secondarily as the communication of a message; for communication alone could be accomplished more easily without ‘other tongues.’”

   b. A sign to unbelieving Israel (1 Cor 14:20–25; cf. Isa 28:11–12)

   1) Tongues are a sign of judgment against the unbelieving Israelites and a token of divine grace to the Gentile unbelievers who hear the message in their own tongues.

   2) Isa 28 refers to foreign languages which implies that Paul is using it in the same way—since he never departs from the original meaning of an OT text he cites.

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11 Davis, “Why There Is No Such Thing as the Gift of Tongues.”

2. Did Paul wish for everyone to speak in tongues (1 Cor 14:5, 18, 39)?

“He does not expect that all will or should speak in tongues (12:30). The Pauline wish is rhetorical and should not be pressed, just as Paul’s wish that all were single should not be pushed too far (1 Cor 7:7).”

3. What are the “tongues of angels”?

a. Paul uses a figure of speech in 1 Corinthians 13:1. “If I speak with the tongue of men and of angels.” It is a hendiadys which is a way of conveying “one through two” (one concept in two ideas). It is a figure meant to convey every possible language.

b. When angels spoke in the Bible, they spoke in a real language that people could understand (cf. Gen. 19; Exod. 33; Joshua 5; Judges 13). Thus, this phrase “tongues of angels” does not support the notion of non-cognitive speech.

c. The following chart shows that Paul is using hyperbolic language in a series of theoretical extremes in order to show the surpassing supremacy of love. Each example is parallel in structure and in thought.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Normal Experience</th>
<th>Superlative or Extreme Expression</th>
<th>Love’s Superiority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tongues:</strong> If I speak with the tongues of men</td>
<td>and of angels</td>
<td>but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or clanging symbol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Εἶναι γὰς γλῶσσας τῶν ἀνθρώπων λαλῶ</td>
<td>καὶ τῶν ἀγγέλων</td>
<td>ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, γένοσα γαλακτος τῆς ζῆσιν ἢ καμήλαν ἀλαλάζων.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prophecy:</strong> If I have the gift of prophecy</td>
<td>and know all mysteries and all knowledge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>καὶ ἔχω προφητείαν</td>
<td>καὶ εἰδῶ τὰ μυστήρια καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν γνώσιν</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Faith:</strong> and if I have [faith]</td>
<td>all faith so as to remove mountains</td>
<td>but do not have love, I am nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>καὶ ἔχω</td>
<td>πᾶσαν τὴν πίστιν ὡστε δρῆ μεθοτάνειν</td>
<td>ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, οὐδὲν εἴμι.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Giving:</strong> And if I give</td>
<td>all my possessions [to feed the poor]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>καὶ ἔχω γνώμως</td>
<td>πᾶσα τὰ ὑπάρχοντα μου</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Giving:</strong> And if I surrender</td>
<td>my body to be burned</td>
<td>but do not have love, it profits me nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>καὶ παραδῶ</td>
<td>τὸ σῶμα μου ἵνα καυχήσωμαι</td>
<td>ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω οὐδὲν ἀφελοῦμι.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


4. Can tongues be a private “prayer language” today?

   a. 1 Cor 14:14–15 is a public prayer, not a private prayer.

   b. 1 Cor 14:28 “speak to himself and God” is not commending private tongues but to keep quiet.

   c. “There is no evidence in the Bible to suggest that the gift of tongues or any other genuine gift of the Holy Spirit was exercised in a trancelike, ecstatic state.”

   d. Matthew 6:7—Jesus gave very specific instruction regarding prayer which excluded private babbling or ecstatic speech (Matt 6:7, “meaningless repetition” NAS or “empty phrases” ESV from βατταλογέω—refers to using “the same words again and again, speak without thinking.” In fact, Jesus’ language in the verse is a strong prohibitive command. Jesus exhorts us to always pray with our minds engaged, cognitive of what we’re saying. He says that praying in babbling language is characteristic of pagan Gentiles who don’t know God as their Father.

5. Are the tongues in Acts the same as those in 1 Corinthians (i.e., foreign languages)?

   a. Same terminology

   The primary word for tongues (glossa) is used in both Acts (2:4, 11; 10:46; 19:6) and in 1 Corinthians (12:10, 28; 13:1, 8; 14:2, 4, 5, 9, 13, 18, 19, 22, 23, 26, 27, 39).

   b. Same description

   It is a speaking gift in both (Acts 2:4, 9-11; 1 Cor 12:30; 14:2, 5)

   c. Same source

   The gift is given in both by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4, 18; 10:44–46; 19:6; 1 Cor 12:1, 7, 11).

   d. Same recipients

   Experienced by both apostles and non-apostles (Acts 11:15-17; 1 Cor 14:18)

   e. Same primary purpose

   In both Acts and 1 Corinthians, tongues were given as a sign to the nation Israel that God was now working through the church (Acts 2:5, 12, 14, 19; called a “sign” in Acts 2:22 and 1 Cor 14:22).

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15 Thomas R. Edgar, Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit, 151.
f. Same connection to other gifts

Closely connected with prophecy (Acts 2:16–18; 19:6; 1 Cor 12–14) and other signs the Apostles were performing (Acts 2:43).

g. Same reaction from unbelievers

They initially thought the tongue speakers were “drunk” in Acts 2 and “mad” in 1 Cor 14:23.

“There is but one clear and definitive passage in the New Testament which unambiguously defines “speaking in tongues” and that is Acts 2. If Acts 2 is allowed to stand as it reads, then “tongues” are known, intelligible languages, spoken by those who received the gift of the Holy Spirit and understood by people who came from the various areas of the ancient world to Jerusalem. We may raise a question of sound interpretation. Would it not be sound methodologically to go from the known definition and the clear passage in the New Testament to the less clear and more difficult passage in interpretation? Should an interpreter in this situation attempt to interpret the more difficult passage of 1 Cor 12–14 in light of the clearer passage of Acts 2? Is this not a sound approach?"17

6. Cautions related to modern-day “tongues”

a. We are commanded to worship, think, pray, and serve with our minds.

“The Bible wishes to know only of the whole man and his love for God, with mind as well as heart, soul, and strength (Mark 12:30), of the worshipful offering to God of the entire self (body), controlled by a renewed mind (Rom 12:1f).”18

b. We must guard against manipulation, emotionalism, or sentimentalism that “rules” our understanding over the authority of Scripture.

c. We must interpret the Scriptures carefully. Our experience is not a determining factor in hermeneutics.

d. We must not minimize the unique nature of Pentecost and the expansion of the church in Acts.

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“We shall find in Acts some events which are unique in their appointed time and place, never being intended to serve as a permanent norm for the Church of the present age. For example, the day of Pentecost has never been precisely duplicated, and all attempts to do so have rested in nothing but spiritual disappointment and often disaster.”

“Many events in Acts are recorded for us to see the formation and early development of the church program, but they are not intended to be patterns for Christians of succeeding generations.”

e. If someone insists that the gift is for today; they should follow the biblical teaching, especially:

1) it is always a foreign language in Scripture exercised in the gathering of the church
2) it is always to be practiced in the biblical order as outlined in Scripture

For further study:


