

What Does the Bible Say About the Holy Spirit and Speaking in Tongues?



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Living and Sharing the Gospel

What Does the Bible Say About Speaking in Tongues?

By Michael D. Morrison and Joseph Tkach
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Chapter 1: Jesus' Promise

“What you are seeing is real,” a church member told the visitor. “These people are filled with the Holy Spirit.” The visitor was seeing a hundred men and women speaking in tongues, raising their hands in the air and singing praises. It was real, not imaginary — but were these people really filled with the Holy Spirit?, he wondered.

Speaking in tongues was a dramatic miracle that helped the Christian church begin (Acts 2). The book of Acts records two other occasions on which the Holy Spirit caused people to speak in tongues, and in his letter to the church at Corinth, the apostle Paul gave instructions about speaking in tongues.

Some churches emphasize the practice of speaking in tongues. They teach that every Christian should speak in tongues as evidence of receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Some of these churches are among the fastest-growing segments of Christianity.

Other churches allow the practice of speaking in tongues, but do not encourage it. In these churches, tongue-speakers may form charismatic fellowship groups within the larger congregation. (*Charismatic* is defined in the glossary at the end of chapter 3.)

Still other churches forbid their members from speaking in tongues.

Speaking in tongues has been vigorously debated during the past century. The major questions are these:

- Does every Christian who receives the Holy Spirit speak in tongues?
- Does speaking in tongues prove that the Holy Spirit has come to a person?
- Are those who speak in tongues more spiritual or closer to God than those who do not?

- What role should tongue-speaking have in church meetings?

To answer these questions, we need to consult the Bible.

Acts 2:1-4

Shortly after Christ had risen into heaven, his disciples were observing the annual festival of Pentecost (Acts 2:1). “Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them” (verses 2-4).

What kind of tongues were these? They were foreign languages. “There were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: ‘Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?... We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!’” (verses 5-8, 11).

The people, amazed and perplexed, asked one another, “What does this mean?” (verse 12). Peter first explained that they were seeing a fulfillment of a prophecy about God’s Spirit (verses 14-21). He then preached a message about Jesus as the Messiah or Christ, and the need for repentance and baptism (verses 22-40). The miraculous languages got the attention of the crowd and allowed Peter, even though he was not a rabbi, to speak with authority to the people.

This experience on the Day of Pentecost is the most dramatic “tongues” incident described in the Bible. This is the most complete description. Let’s note a few details about it:

- There were three miracles: a miraculous sound, an appearance like fire

and speaking in other tongues.

- The “other tongues” were languages currently understandable by Jews from other nations. No interpreters were needed.
- The crowd may have thought the miracle was in the hearing (verses 6, 8, 11), but the biblical writers call it a miracle of speaking (verses 4, 18).
- Some people ridiculed the apostles and accused them of being drunk (verse 13).
- There is no indication that Peter’s sermon, beginning in verse 14, was given in a miraculous “tongue.”
- Peter proclaimed to those who accepted his message that they should repent and be baptized and thereby “receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (verse 38). This promise applies to Christians of every century, but the verse does not make clear whether the “gift of the Holy Spirit” means that the Holy Spirit is the gift, or whether Peter meant that, in addition to receiving the Holy Spirit, they would receive speaking in tongues or some other manifestation of the Spirit as the gift.
- Peter spoke of repentance and baptism, but he did not describe any other action needed for the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- Thousands were baptized, and many miracles were done (verses 41-43), but there is no further mention of miraculous tongues on that occasion.

The way the story is told in Acts, the apostles’ miraculous ability to speak in foreign languages was only one of many kinds of miracles experienced by the early church. Acts describes many other miracles as God guided the new church into growth through the Holy Spirit. None of those miracles is presented as a requirement for every Christian.

The book of Acts describes two other occurrences of speaking in tongues — one in Caesarea and one in Ephesus. We’ll examine those passages next. (Some scholars say that Acts 8:14-18 reports a tongue-speaking incident in

Samaria. The Holy Spirit came upon people in some noticeable way, but there is no mention of tongues, so we do not learn anything about tongues in that passage.)

Acts 10:44-46

The second description of speaking in tongues comes when non-Israelites were first added to the church — perhaps 10 years after Christ’s death and resurrection. Up until that time, the church had been primarily Jewish. The apostle Peter had been invited to the house of Cornelius, a gentile (non-Jewish) army officer in Caesarea who worshiped the true God (Acts 10:24-25). Many people were in the house, and Peter told them about Jesus Christ, faith and forgiveness (verses 27, 34-43).

“While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message” (verse 44). The Jews with Peter “were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God” (verses 45-46).

It is difficult to discern from this brief mention what these “tongues” sounded like. It says nothing about interpreters, for example, or foreign languages. Nor does it say that the gentiles were seeking the gift of tongues; they simply listened to the gospel and believed. The “tongues” were regarded as miraculous, and Acts 11:15 indicates they were similar to the tongues mentioned in Acts 2.

The miraculous tongues of Acts 10, combined with the miracle of Acts 2, helped Jewish Christians realize that God was adding non-Jewish people to the church. Since religious Jews had traditionally separated themselves from gentiles, God used a special sign to demonstrate to the Jewish Christians that he had also accepted gentiles as his children (Acts 15:7-8).

Acts 19:1-6

Christianity continued to expand to new geographic regions and include

more people. The third and final example of tongues from the book of Acts occurred in the city of Ephesus. Paul found some disciples who followed the teachings of John the Baptist. They didn't know about the Holy Spirit, so Paul informed them more fully, and taught them that John told people to believe in Jesus (Acts 19:1-4).

Tongues-speaking in the book of Acts - conclusion

Let us go back to our first question: Does every Christian who receives the Holy Spirit speak in tongues? The book of Acts records many healings and other miracles, but only three incidents of tongues. This suggests that tongue-speaking was not a common occurrence, but rather a miraculous sign for special occasions as the apostles preached the gospel and established the church.

It seems that most New Testament Christians did not speak in tongues. Several verses tell us that people were "filled with the Holy Spirit," but without any mention of tongues. Let's notice the following verses:

Not long after Pentecost, the apostles were praying for God's help. After they finished praying, "the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly" (Acts 4:31). The apostles had already been filled with the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Here they are filled again. Miraculous shaking is mentioned, but speaking in tongues is not.

There is no mention of tongues when the Holy Spirit came on converts in Samaria (Acts 8:14-17), when the Ethiopian eunuch was converted (Acts 8:38), when Saul, who became Paul, was converted (Acts 9:17-18), when he confronted a sorcerer (Acts 13:8-11) or when Paul first preached in Asia (verses 44-52). This doesn't prove that tongue-speaking did not occur, but it does indicate that it was not important to mention it. Last, we note that the Gospels do not describe Jesus himself as speaking in tongues.

The evidence, so far, is limited. Acts is primarily a story of what happened; the book doesn't contain many commands or promises. Like many histories, it focuses on unusual or ground-breaking events. There is little attempt to describe ordinary practices. The book of Acts gives us only a limited picture of speaking in tongues. However, Paul wrote a great deal about tongues in a letter to the Corinthian Christians. His instructions help us understand whether tongue-speaking is evidence of God's Spirit, of deeper conversion, or of being closer to God.

Seeking the Gift of Tongues

Pentecostal churches teach that Christians receive the Holy Spirit when they are first converted, but that they are not filled with the Spirit until they are baptized with the Spirit. This second blessing, this baptism of the Spirit, is not considered necessary for salvation, but people are encouraged to seek it in order to receive additional power to witness.

Spirit-baptism, Pentecostals believe, always includes speaking in tongues. Therefore, those who desire Spirit-baptism will seek to speak in tongues. However, any attempts to imitate the tongues of Pentecost are attempts to imitate only one of the miracles of that day. There were other miracles that day, too. God will give what he wants to give.

The real lesson of Pentecost is not in the miracles, but in Peter's message: "Repent and be baptized...in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

Loosening the tongue does not necessarily require a miracle, but loosening the heart in real repentance does. Whoever believes, repents and is baptized will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. No further steps or tarry meetings are needed.

"On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.

When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied” (verses 5-6).

Again, it is impossible to tell what these tongues sounded like. All we know is that these disciples were rebaptized so they could receive the Holy Spirit. Whether they were expecting the gifts of tongues and prophecy isn't stated.

The tongues in Acts 2 and 10 came with significant developments in the expansion of the church. But in Acts 19, we are not told why this group of John's disciples was significant enough for special mention. We do know that it emphasized the need for all Jews, even those who already lived repentant, obedient lives, to accept Christian baptism. It also showed that Paul was an apostle of Christ and that his mission to the gentiles was approved by God.

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Chapter 2: Tongue-Speaking in Corinth

On Paul's second major journey to preach the gospel to gentiles, he went into Europe, preaching briefly in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea and Athens (Acts 16:12-17:15).

In Corinth, however, Paul spent a year and a half (Acts 18:1, 9-11) — a long stay for an apostle who was “constantly on the move” (2 Corinthians 11:26). Corinth was a seaport city with a reputation for immorality. There Paul found Jews and gentiles who wanted to be taught the Word of God.

After the congregation had been established in Corinth, Paul eventually moved on — to Ephesus in Asia Minor, Caesarea in Judea, Antioch in Syria, and, after a few years, to Ephesus again (Acts 18:18-23; 19:1).

Bad news from Corinth

While Paul was back in Ephesus, he heard about the Corinthian church. The news was not good — the new Christians were arguing among themselves about several aspects of Christian behavior. Their example made Christianity look bad, even to the immoral pagans!

The Corinthian Christians sent Paul a letter asking him for advice about a number of topics, including the topic of tongues. They had been speaking in tongues frequently, and they asked him about this spiritual gift. Their letter gave him an opportunity to give them the guidance they needed.

In his letter Paul criticized them because their arguments were ruining the unity that Christians ought to have. “Some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you” (1 Corinthians 1:11). “I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it” (1 Corinthians 11:18). “Your meetings do more harm than good” (verse 17).

In their disagreements, some of the people claimed to follow one

Christian leader, and some claimed to follow another (1 Corinthians 1:12). The behavior of the Corinthian Christians was wrong, and Paul had to correct them.

“I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought” (verse 10).

Paul writes about their problems

In chapters 1-4, Paul tried to help the Corinthians see the problems of disunity. They were acting like unbelievers, not like Christians (1 Corinthians 3:3).

He told them what to do about sexual immorality within the Church (1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 6:12-20) and lawsuits between Christians (verses 1-8). These subjects illustrate the problems the congregation was having. Paul had to set them straight with strong words.

Then Paul began to answer their questions. “Now for the matters you wrote about...” (1 Corinthians 7:1). First, he dealt with the topic of marriage in chapter 7.

Chapter 8 begins to address their next subject: “Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (verse 1).

From the way Paul writes his letter, we can tell that the Corinthian Christians were proud of their “knowledge.” Paul points out that their knowledge, at least the way they were using it, was harmful to their spiritual growth. Their knowledge was causing arguments and divisions in the congregation. Love, he writes, is more valuable, and it is a better indicator of Christian living.

Chapter 9 explains Paul’s right as an apostle, and chapter 10 continues the subject of food sacrificed to idols. In chapter 11, Paul comments on some

problems the Corinthians had in their worship meetings.

Various spiritual gifts

In chapter 12, Paul begins a new section, which contains comments on tongues. “Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant” (verse 1). They needed instruction to help them use their spiritual gifts in a helpful way.

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, Paul tells us, even though they are all inspired by the same Spirit (verse 4). God gives these special abilities “for the common good” — so Christians can help one another (verse 7). Paul lists various gifts, including “speaking in different kinds of tongues, and...the interpretation of tongues” (verse 10).

What are these tongues? Are they foreign languages, like the miraculous tongues spoken on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11)? Or does this gift of tongues produce other kinds of sounds? The fact that a supernatural gift was needed for interpreting the sounds (1 Corinthians 12:10; 14:13) indicates that the speaking may not have been a human language. But we cannot know whether modern tongue-speaking is anything like the Corinthian practice.

Paul lists similar spiritual gifts in his letter to the Roman Christians (Romans 12:6-8), but that list doesn't mention tongues or interpretation. Corinth seems to have been the only church congregation where tongues were spoken regularly.

Not everyone has the same spiritual gift or ability, Paul notes. God distributes them: one power to one person, another gift to the next person, a third ability to another, just as God determines (1 Corinthians 12:8-11). By dividing the gifts in this way, God encourages members to work with and help one another.

The analogy of a human body illustrates this. Feet, hands, eyes and other parts serve different functions. By contributing to the body as a whole, the

various parts serve one another. So it is in the Church, the Body of Christ (verses 12-27). God appoints people with various spiritual functions: apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle-workers, healers, helpers, administrators and speaking in different kinds of tongues (verse 28).

“Are all apostles?” asks Paul. Of course not. Neither are all Christians prophets, teachers, miracle-workers, healers, tongue-speakers or interpreters (verses 29-30).

From the way Paul presents his argument, it seems that some Corinthians expected every Christian to have the same gift when it came to tongues. They doubted the spirituality of anyone who did not have that gift. That isn't a reasonable way to judge Christianity, Paul tells them. None of these spiritual gifts can be singled out as the one and only test of the Holy Spirit.

The best spiritual quality

It is good to desire the greater spiritual gifts, says Paul, perhaps agreeing with something the Corinthians had written in their letter (verse 31). It seems that the Corinthian Christians eagerly desired to be spiritual and to appear spiritual.

In chapter 13, Paul describes the best evidence of spirituality — love. If love is not present, it does not matter what kind of miracle-working gifts a person might have (verses 1-3).

Paul mentioned “tongues of men and of angels” (verse 1). “Tongues of men” means human languages, but what are the “tongues of...angels”? There is no indication in the Bible that angels speak to humans in mysterious languages. Every time they spoke to humans, they were understood.

So why did Paul mention angelic languages? It may be that some of the Corinthian tongue-speakers claimed that their sounds were angelic. Or perhaps Paul used the term as the most exalted tongue-speaking he could imagine. And, of course, in the realm of spirits there certainly is a different

vocabulary. In any case, Paul tells us that tongue-speaking without love would be nothing, no matter how “spiritual” it might appear.

God’s way of life is based on love. Love perseveres and endures forever; it will never fail or become unnecessary (verses 7-8). In contrast, spiritual gifts will eventually no longer be needed. Knowledge, at least the kind that the Corinthians were proud of, will pass away (verse 8). Even prophecy, a gift that Paul praises, will cease.

“For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes [at the return of Christ], the imperfect disappears.... Now I know in part; then I shall know fully” (verses 9-12).

When God’s people are resurrected and become completely perfect, special spiritual knowledge will no longer be important, because everyone will know fully. Divine messages and predictions will no longer be important, for the same reason. Tongues will likewise cease. Certain spiritual gifts have value in this temporal age, but they are not of eternal significance in the way that love is.

A better form of speaking

Spiritual gifts do have value, so we should want to have them (1 Corinthians 12:31). But what kind of gifts should we desire? We follow the way of love. We should eagerly desire a gift that helps others. “Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church” (1 Corinthians 14:12).

Paul recommends “the gift of prophecy” (verse 1). He does not necessarily refer to predicting the future. The Greek word Paul used here means “an utterance inspired by God...the capacity or ability to utter inspired messages.” The verb translated “prophecy” means “to speak under the influence of divine inspiration, with or without reference to future events” (Louw and Nida — see the bibliography).

In other words, the gift of prophecy is, as Edgar Goodspeed translates it, “inspired preaching.” Today’s English Version calls it “the gift of proclaiming God’s message.” Speaking in prophecy, Paul says, is better than speaking in tongues. “He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues” (verse 5). Why? Because inspired preaching can be understood, and tongues cannot (without an interpreter).

“Anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men.... No one understands him.... But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort” (verses 2-3). Inspired preaching can be understood; its purpose is building or edifying the Church (verses 4, 31) — helping Christians live better lives.

Paul says it is good to speak in tongues, but it is much better to prophesy (verse 5). “I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue” (verse 19). “Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying?” (verse 9).

“If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful” (verse 14). If the mind is unfruitful, it implies that even the tongue-speaker didn’t understand the sounds. The speaker wouldn’t be able to explain it without supernatural help (verse 13).

This is also shown in Paul’s comments about musical instruments: The tune isn’t identifiable “unless there is a distinction in the notes” (verse 7). Similarly, messages cannot be understood if there is no distinction in sounds. In the tongues spoken by the Corinthians, it seems, words couldn’t be distinguished from one another. The message could not be understood.

Were the Corinthians speaking foreign languages that no one in Corinth understood?

Or were the sounds simply not part of any human language?

Paul doesn't clearly tell us. His comments cover both possibilities — sounds that had no meaning, or a foreign language that no one knew. In either case, the result was the same: In Corinth, the tongues could not be understood. They may have had some value to the speaker (verse 4), but they were of no value to the congregation.

Interpretation and order

Paul used part of his letter to tell the Corinthian Christians how to use the gift of tongues. It seems that it was their regular custom to speak in tongues. But tongues had become a problem — enough of a problem for the Corinthians to ask Paul's advice about the situation.

For the specific circumstances at Corinth, Paul advised tongue-speakers to pray for the gift of interpretation (verse 13); it is only through interpretation that others could learn something from the sounds (verse 5).

“If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church” (verse 28). This implies that the speakers were able to control themselves. They had to be silent unless someone known to have the gift of interpretation was also there. They should speak in an orderly way. They should not disrupt services but contribute to them. Paul explained, “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (verse 33). When spiritual gifts are being used, there is no excuse for confusion. If there is chaos, the people are not allowing God to work in them in the way he wants.

Paul stressed that worship services “should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (verse 40). Apparently the Corinthian meetings had been disorderly, with many people speaking at the same time. “If the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?” (verse 23).

In contrast, Paul says, if some outsiders hear inspired speaking and

teaching, they may worship God (verses 24-25).

So Paul gave the Corinthians some simple rules for improving the organization of their worship meetings. People could come prepared to participate in various ways, according to their gifts or abilities. The primary rule, based on the way of love, was that “all of these must be done for the strengthening of the church” (verse 26).

Only one person should speak at a time, and there should be only two or three speaking in tongues in any one meeting (verse 27). (This rule applied to prophets, too.) If anyone speaks in a tongue, someone must interpret. If no one could explain the message, the tongue-speaker had to be quiet (verse 28).

Paul forcefully corrected the Corinthians on some of their problems, but on the topic of tongues he was gentle. He did not want the correction to cause more division than the problem had caused. “Do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (verses 39-40).

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Chapter 3: Evaluating Spiritual Gifts

“My friends, you asked me about spiritual gifts,” Paul wrote the Corinthian Christians (1 Corinthians 12:1; quotes are from the Contemporary English Version, copyright 1991, American Bible Society). “I want you to desire the best gifts” (verse 31).

The Corinthians desired spiritual gifts. Paul took this opportunity to emphasize the spiritual gifts that would best serve the entire community of believers. “If you really want spiritual gifts, choose the ones that will be most helpful to the church” (1 Corinthians 14:12).

“Love should be your guide. Be eager to have the gifts that come from the Holy Spirit, especially the gift of prophecy.... When you prophesy [speak an inspired message — see *prophecy* in the glossary], you will be understood, and others will be helped” (verses 1, 3).

Purpose of speaking: to be understood

Paul was giving the Christians in Corinth some guidance that they had asked for. He corrected a mistake they were making. They had been seeking the gift of tongues, but they were misusing the gift.

These tongues weren't helping the congregation. “If you speak languages that others don't know, God will understand what you are saying, though no one else will know what you mean.... By speaking languages that others don't know, you help only yourself” (verses 2, 4).

Paul said they didn't have to stop speaking in tongues (verse 39), but he did want them to turn their enthusiasm into more helpful channels, either by interpreting the unknown sounds, or simply by speaking words that could be understood.

“I am glad for you to speak unknown languages, although I had rather for you to prophesy. In fact, prophesying does much more good than speaking

unknown languages, unless someone can help the church by explaining what you mean” (verse 5). “When we speak languages that others don’t know, we should pray for the power to explain what we mean” (verse 13).

The most helpful gift is the gift of inspired speaking (verse 1). It can encourage, comfort and teach (verses 3, 31).

Meetings should be orderly

Paul also gave the Corinthians advice about a related concern: order in worship meetings. “My friends, when you meet to worship, you must do everything for the good of everyone there” (verse 26).

First, he gave instructions for people who spoke in tongues: “No more than two or three of you should speak.... You must take turns, and someone should always be there to explain what you mean. If no one can explain, you must keep silent in church” (verses 27-28).

Similar instructions were given for people who prophesied in language that could be understood: “Let only one person speak at a time, then all of you will learn something and be encouraged” (verse 31).

The Corinthians needed some advice about this; apparently their meetings had been full of confusion. “Suppose everyone in your worship service started speaking unknown languages, and some outsiders or some unbelievers come in. Won’t they think you are crazy?” (verse 23).

Paul was disappointed with how the Corinthian church meetings had been conducted. Earlier, Paul had scolded them because they had been arguing: “Your worship services do you more harm than good. I am certainly not going to praise you for this. I am told that you can’t get along with each other when you worship.... You are bound to argue with each other” (1 Corinthians 11:17-19).

So Paul stressed order. “God wants everything to be done peacefully and in order.... Do everything properly and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:33, 40).

Was it really the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit can inspire tongue-speaking, as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12:7-11 and as we see in the book of Acts. But tongue-speaking can happen in other ways, too. Non-Christians, both ancient and modern, have spoken in tongues. Several ancient religions included tongue-speaking, usually (as far as we can tell) not a real language, but simply strings of syllables, also called ecstatic speech:

There are records of ecstatic speech and the like in Egypt in the eleventh century B.C. In the hellenistic [Greek] world the prophetess of Delphi and the Sibylline priestess spoke in unknown or unintelligible speech. Moreover, the Dionysian rites contained a trancelike state as well as glossolalia. Many of the magicians and sorcerers of the first century world exhibit similar phenomena. (G.R. Osborne, in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1984, page 1100.)

Descriptions of ecstatic speech are common in the study of comparative religions.... The Delphic and Pythian religions of Greece understood ecstatic behavior and speech to be evidence of divine inspiration by Apollos. [C.M. Robeck, Jr., in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 4, 1988, page 872.]

How did these ancient pagans speak in tongues? Perhaps they were given supernatural abilities by demons, but perhaps they did it simply from human ability. Modern investigations have found that tongues — or at least something that sounds like tongues — can come from a natural source, the human brain:

The tongues phenomena can be explained on psychological, sociological, physiological and linguistic ground alone.... The consensus of most social scientists is that glossolalia (tongue-speaking) takes place when a person is functioning in some type

of altered mental state.... Psychologists consider them [tongues] to be explainable in terms not necessarily supernatural or spiritual.... The psychological state of the glossalalist is altered in some way. (Klemet Preus, *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 46, 1982, pages 280-281.)

Glossolalia is not language in the ordinary sense.... It is, rather, a willed and welcomed vocal event in which, in a context of attention to religious realities, the tongue operates within one's mood but apart from one's mind in a way comparable to the fantasy-languages of children.... Glossolalia is regularly both taught...and learned, and is in fact easy to do if one wants to. (J.I. Packer, *Churchman*, Vol. 94, 1980, pages 108-109)

Glossolalia is a learned skill, however unconscious its mechanism. The occasions on which it is manifest are to a high degree dependent upon expectations of a specific group, expressed in part through ritualized procedures. Even the characteristic bodily motions accompanying dissociation and some aspects of modulations in the utterances are specific to a particular group and even to the leader who has "taught" the glossolalist. And the interpretation given to glossolalia depends upon the belief system of the group. (Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 1983, page 120.)

Ecstatic speech, although unusual, is a natural ability that can be taught. Tongue-speaking is not necessarily a miracle, so it cannot be proof of the Holy Spirit. The Corinthian Christians, however, had been assuming that tongue-speaking was proof of supernatural inspiration.

From the way that Paul writes, we conclude that some of the Corinthians had a real spiritual gift for speaking in tongues. However, others — the ones causing confusion — were imitating the gift. Perhaps influenced by the importance given to ecstatic sounds in pagan religions, some of the

Corinthians emphasized tongue-speaking as a visible evidence of being spiritual. In doing so, they were neglecting the more important parts of Christianity, such as love.

Paul redirected their thoughts to help them see a better way. He started by reminding the Corinthians of their pagan past (1 Corinthians 12:2), and he gave an extreme example to show that not every saying is inspired by God (verse 3). Messages need to be examined before they can be accepted (1 Corinthians 14:29, 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21). God will not inspire a message that contradicts the Bible or the way of love.

Since the message needs to be evaluated, it has to be understood. That is why Paul says the gift of tongues, if there is no interpreter, is for private use (1 Corinthians 14:28), and that is why he emphasizes prophecy.

Understandable speaking is better than ecstatic sounds in several ways: It can be controlled and orderly, it can teach and edify both believers and unbelievers; and it is not noisy chaos. No one would confuse it with the ecstasy that occurred in groups who, for example, worshipped the wine god while drinking and making noise with musical instruments.

“Brothers, stop thinking like children” (verse 20). Paul did not mean that tongue-speaking was childish, but rather that the Corinthian overemphasis on tongues was childish. Paul quoted a passage from Isaiah 28:11-12 to point out that speaking in strange tongues is not always an effective way to bring people to God.

Tongues are a sign “for unbelievers.” People who don’t yet believe in God look for miraculous proofs (1 Corinthians 14:22). But even if they see tongues, they may scoff, perhaps saying the people are drunk, crazy or even demon-inspired (verse 23, Acts 2:13).

Tongues, as a sign, do not lead people to the obedience and faith in Jesus our Lord. Christians, who already believe, need to look for the less

spectacular but more important change in the human heart, a change Paul describes as the way of love.

Did Paul speak in tongues?

But didn't Paul himself speak in tongues? He says he did in 1 Corinthians 14:18, but we do not know what kind of tongues he spoke. He knew several languages, but this is probably not what he meant. He did not say he spoke in more languages; rather, he said he spoke in tongues more often than the Corinthians did. He could pray in a tongue, but he preferred to pray with understanding (verses 14-15).

Paul described many of his supernatural and natural experiences (2 Corinthians 12:1-5, 11:21-30), but he doesn't say anything more about tongues. Apparently it wasn't important for Christians then or now. From the instructions he gave the Corinthians, it is clear that Paul would not have spoken in a church meeting in a language that others could not understand (1 Corinthians 14:19).

Paul said that tongues could edify the speaker (verse 4), but the importance of self-edification is limited. After all, the Corinthians had been overestimating themselves in wisdom and knowledge and spirituality; they were puffed up with self-importance. They did not need more attention on self — for spiritual maturity, they needed to exercise love for others, and build up the church, not themselves (verses 3-4).

What did Paul mean when he wrote, "I would like every one of you to speak in tongues" (verse 5)? Perhaps he wished that all the Corinthians were really speaking messages from God. Whatever he meant, he immediately clarified that his greater desire was that the Christians speak in a way that could be understood: "I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified."

The Corinthian experience with tongue-speaking seems to have been an isolated case, and Paul dealt with it in a tactful, instructive way. He allowed a limited amount of tongue-speaking, but he did not allow it in church meetings if there was no interpretation. He did not allow several people to speak at once (verses 27-28). He clearly said that orderly, understandable messages were better.

But if a person wanted to speak in an unknown tongue at home, in private, the Church should allow it (verse 39). The unusual speech might encourage people to continue building their relationship with God. At least it would be a reminder that we are not always able to clearly describe our needs (Romans 8:26).

Summary

Does speaking in tongues prove that the Holy Spirit has come to a person? No. Gifts or abilities, no matter how miraculous they appear, should not automatically be accepted as divine. They should be tested to see whether they are in harmony with God's Word and the Christian way of life.

Are those who speak in tongues more spiritual or closer to God than those who do not? Not necessarily. If those who speak in tongues don't have love, Paul says, they are useless noisemakers — no matter what language they speak (1 Corinthians 13:1).

What role should tongue-speaking have in the Church? Paul does not forbid tongue-speaking, but he strictly limits its role in the meetings of the Church. He tells the Corinthians not to do it during their meetings unless someone could interpret. Even if interpreters are there, only one person should speak at a time.

The gift of tongues, or any other gift, is not a special mark of spirituality. All the gifts of the Spirit are given as God decides (1 Corinthians 12:11). As we follow the example given in the book of Acts, we do not need to make

special effort to experience this particular gift. (See “Seeking the Gift of Tongues,” page 6.) No one, no matter what gifts one has, has any reason to be proud or to look down on others (verses 21-25). And Christians with “small” gifts need not feel bad. Each should simply use his or her abilities to best serve others (Romans 12:6-13).

Mark 16:15-18

We have no biblical evidence that Jesus ever spoke in tongues. And as far as we know, he didn't say anything about it. It is mentioned in Mark 16:15-18, but there are two problem with this passage.

First, the oldest, most reliable manuscripts of the New Testament do not have this passage. Most scholars conclude that it was added to the text by a scribe who wanted to give Mark a more complete ending. Almost all modern translations indicate that these verses were most likely not in the original version of Mark.

Second, even if these verses are authentic, they tell us almost nothing about tongues. They say: “These signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well” (verses 17-18).

These verses do not predict how often these signs would occur, or whether every believer would be involved in each of these signs, or whether believers should make special efforts to display these miracles. To answer such questions, we need to look at other scriptures.

The book of Acts describes incidents of casting out demons, healings and supernatural protection against deadly things. However, believers did not go out of their way to find demons or to be exposed to deadly things. In the case of healing, we know that there were times when it did not happen (2

Corinthians 12:7-10, for example).

Mark 16:17-18 simply lists a few of the many types of miracles that God's church would experience. This list is neither a command nor a promise for every Christian. To answer our questions about speaking in tongues, we must examine other scriptures.

Fruit of the Holy Spirit

“Live by the Spirit,” Paul tells us in Galatians 5:16, not by the “desires of the sinful nature.” These phrases represent opposite approaches to life (verse 17). In verses 19-21, Paul describes some of the acts of the sinful nature, and in verses 22-23 he describes some of the fruit or results of the Holy Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

In Ephesians 5:9, Paul describes more “fruit” of the Christian life: “goodness, righteousness and truth.” The Holy Spirit also produces life and peace (Romans 8:6), hope (Romans 15:13) and spiritual wisdom (1 Corinthians 2:6-15). All Christians should have all these qualities.

As we yield to God's Spirit (Romans 8:13-14), and as we are led by the Spirit of Christ (verse 9), we will have Jesus Christ's mercy and compassion for others and his love for God's way of life.

“By their fruit you will recognize them,” said Jesus (Matthew 7:20). Many people will call Jesus “Lord,” and they will prophesy and perform miracles in his name (verses 21-22), but unless they do the will of the Father, they are false prophets (verses 21, 15). “By their fruit [by the way they live] you will recognize them” (verse 16). All Christians should have the fruit of God's Spirit.

Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The “gifts” of the Spirit are God-given abilities distributed as God knows

is best for different aspects of Christian service. But not every Christian has the same gift, just as not every part of the human body performs the function of seeing, hearing or walking (1 Corinthians 12:14-26). Through a division of labor, God encourages us to work with one another to be more efficient. As we work together, Christ gives his Church growth (Ephesians 4:15-16).

What are the various gifts? Paul lists some in 1 Corinthians 12:28-30: Church leadership positions such as apostle, prophet and teacher, or gifts of miracles and healings, or less spectacular but equally necessary abilities such as helping others and administration.

Another list is in verses 7-10: messages of wisdom or knowledge, faith and healing and miracles, inspired messages of prophecy, tongues or interpretations, or a special gift for distinguishing between spirits. (The Greek word for “distinguishing” is also used in 14:29. This gift was probably used to tell which prophecies or tongue-interpretations were genuine and which were false.)

The precise difference between wisdom and knowledge, or faith and healing and miracles may not be important in this list; Paul is simply making the point that spiritual gifts come in many varieties, although they are all “for the common good.”

Romans 12:6-8 gives yet another list of gifts (none of the lists is exhaustive): prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving to others, leading others or showing mercy. Some of these service gifts should be found in all Christians, but some people are distinctly better at certain activities than other people are.

As God gives us these abilities, we should apply them as best we can for the common good of the Body of Christ.

The gifts in these lists come in three major categories: Church leadership, speaking, and serving others. Peter summarizes “gifts” under the categories

of speaking and serving (1 Peter 4:11). “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms” (verse 10).

Paul said that God had given (the Greek verb is similar to the noun used for “gift”) the Philippian Christians the ability to believe in Christ and also the opportunity to suffer for him (Philippians 1:29-30).

Suffering patiently and faithfully can also be a useful spiritual gift. Paul described a “thorn in my flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7), which served by emphasizing Paul’s weaknesses, therefore showing that the power of his message came not from himself but from God (verses 8-10).

Paul referred to marital status, whether married or not, as a gift (1 Corinthians 7:7). Any of life’s circumstances can be considered a gift of God if we are able to use it to glorify Christ and serve others. It does not matter how spectacular or seemingly ordinary the gift is — what matters is how it is used (1 Corinthians 13:1-4). Love, a fruit of the Spirit that all Christians must have, is the test of whether an ability or gift is good.

All gifts should be used to glorify Christ and to benefit others.

What Is the Baptism of the Holy Spirit?

John the Baptist predicted that Jesus would baptize people with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:6-8). In Acts 1:5, Jesus told his disciples that they would receive this baptism in a few days. On the Festival of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit filled the disciples (Acts 2:4), fulfilling the predictions of John and Jesus. Peter said the Spirit had been poured out on them (verses 17, 33).

Years later, the Holy Spirit came on Cornelius and other gentiles (Acts 10:44-45). This was the same as the Holy Spirit being “poured out,” or having “received” the Holy Spirit (verses 45, 47), or being “baptized” with the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:15-17).

All these terms refer to the same thing: The Holy Spirit is given to God’s

people. The promised baptism is available to all who believe (Acts 2:38-39). Paul indicated that people usually received the Holy Spirit when they believed (Acts 19:2). The book of Acts records several instances when people were filled with the Holy Spirit (see page 8).

Paul and the other New Testament writers do not use the phrase “baptism of the Spirit,” but they do write about the Holy Spirit being given to God’s people. The Spirit is available to all believers as “a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance” (Ephesians 1:13-14).

In 1 Corinthians 12:13, Paul writes that all believers are baptized by the Spirit into the Body of Christ, the Church. In Ephesians 5:18 he tells us to “be filled with the Spirit.” In Greek, a writer could use a different form of a word to indicate whether a command was for a onetime event or for a continual activity. Paul used the continual form, indicating that Christians should always live according to the Spirit. He was not writing about an unusual experience that initiates people into a new status.

Nothing in Paul’s epistles suggests that the gift of the Spirit comes in two steps or blessings. He does not suggest that the gift of tongues, for example, is evidence of having more spiritual power. Romans 12 doesn’t even mention tongues as a gift of importance. Church leaders were not required to have the gift of tongues. Instead, they should be able to teach in language that could be understood (1 Timothy 3:1-2, Titus 1:5-9).

What is the evidence of God’s Spirit? What can prove that God is in us? His love. If we love others, if we love even our enemies, it is evidence that God’s Spirit is guiding us.

If we are inspired to live God’s way, if our lives show the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), we are giving evidence that God’s Spirit is filling our minds and hearts. A good Christian example is a powerful witness to faith in Jesus Christ.

Seeking After Signs

Jesus said in Mark 16:17-18: “These signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.”

Some people have taken these verses as a requirement, as if it were a commission that Christians ought to try to fulfill to prove their authenticity. Some groups attempt to pick up poisonous snakes without being harmed. The handlers usually avoid being bitten, but sometimes they are bitten and die. The success rate does not matter. What is important is whether God wants his people to be doing this.

Should God’s people do dangerous things so God will rescue them with a miracle for all to see that God approves of them? Are miracles necessary to prove that Christianity is right?

Faith does not come from seeing miracles. The Israelites who crossed the Red Sea saw numerous miracles, but they did not have the faith to obey God. And many Christians have believed without seeing anything dramatic. Faith comes when God allows someone to believe the gospel (Romans 10:13-14; John 6:44). The primary miracle is in the heart and mind, not necessarily anything that can be seen.

Moreover, God does not want us to do dangerous things in order to prompt his intervention. Satan tempted Jesus with such a challenge, and Jesus answered, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (Matthew 4:5-7). We should not try to force God to do anything. Such conduct shows a lack of faith.

The scripture in Mark 16 is a prediction, not a command. It simply says that some Christians would experience these miracles; it is not a promise to

protect all Christians, or to heal all, or that all would speak in tongues, or that all would cast out demons. It indicates that various miracles would happen; it does not say how often they would happen.

Miracles still occur today — healing, for example. Demons have been cast out. Christians have been miraculously spared from accidents. But others have died in faith.

The real proof of Christianity is not miracles. It is the love of God, the fruit of the Spirit of Christ in us, motivating us to love one another and to love and obey God (Romans 5:5; Galatians 5:22; John 13:34-35; Romans 8:14; Acts 5:32).

Glossary

Caesarea. A city about 80 miles northwest of Jerusalem, where the Holy Spirit came upon the gentile Cornelius and his household.

Charismatics. Those of various denominations who emphasize spiritual gifts such as tongue-speaking, healing or prophecy. They usually do not teach that everyone should have the same gift. The Greek word *charismata* means “gifts.”

Ecstatic speech. Non-language syllables produced when the brain sends signals to the organs of speech (throat, tongue and lips) but the language center of the brain does not organize the signals. The person can be conscious or in a trancelike state.

Ephesus. A city in western Asia Minor, near modern Izmir in western Turkey. The miraculous tongue-speaking at Ephesus showed that disciples of John the Baptist were accepted into Christian churches after faith, baptism and the laying on of hands.

Glossolalia. Speaking in tongues. The Greek word *glossa* means “tongue,” and *laleo* means “speak.”

John the Baptist. A Jewish prophet who prepared the way for Jesus. He had many disciples even 20 years after his death.

Pentecost. One of the annual religious festivals God told the Israelites to observe. It comes about seven weeks after Passover. It was on Pentecost that the Holy Spirit filled the disciples, causing them to speak in tongues, and the New Testament Church was founded.

Pentecostalism. A movement that stresses the importance of tongue-speaking as a “second blessing.” People are taught that they receive the Holy Spirit upon conversion, but are not filled with or baptized with the Holy Spirit until they speak in tongues.

Prophecy. A God-inspired saying or a message from God. The verb

translated “prophesy” means to speak under divine inspiration, with or without referring to future events.

Samaria. A region about 40 miles north of Jerusalem. The Samaritan people were of mixed ancestry, both Israelite and gentile. When the gospel was preached in Samaria, the Holy Spirit came upon converts in some noticeable way, but there is no mention of tongues (Acts 8:14-18).

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Diversity and Unity in Spiritual Gifts: 1 Corinthians 12

The church members in Corinth asked Paul a number of questions, and Paul responded in the letter we know as 1 Corinthians. One of the topics he addresses is “spiritual gifts.” Paul’s explanation begins in chapter 12; we’ll begin in verse 3.

Same source, but different results (verses 3-7)

Paul comments on how God works in different ways in different people: “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.”

Paul uses “gifts,” “service,” and “working” as roughly equivalent (just as Spirit, Lord and God are equivalent). The three terms are not distinct categories, but they highlight different aspects of the same phenomena: 1) that the abilities are given, not something we can take credit for ourselves, 2) they are given for service, to help other people, and 3) they work; they produce results in our lives. The main point is that God works in different ways in different people.

Paul summarizes the purpose: “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” Spiritual gifts are not for a person’s private benefit—they are to help the church as a whole.

Various gifts (verses 8-11)

Paul lists some of the gifts: “To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit.” Generally speaking, knowledge refers to awareness of facts; wisdom refers to the ability to apply facts to the right situation. The Corinthian believers seem to be interested in knowledge and wisdom, and

that may be why Paul begins with these two gifts.

He lists more: “to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits.” All believers have faith, but some have stronger faith than others. Presumably someone who has a gift of miraculous healing also has stronger faith than most people. These gifts overlap; Paul is giving examples, not creating totally distinct categories. He will have more to say about prophecy in chapter 14.

Paul ends with the gift that was causing the most problems in Corinth, and its solution; “to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues.” No matter what the “tongues” were, no one in Corinth understood them, except people who had the special gift of interpretation.

“If a person who did not speak in tongues should say, “Because I do not speak in tongues, I do not belong here,” Paul would respond: “That does not disqualify you—you are still part of the body.”

The main point for Paul here is that “all these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.” Not everyone is given the same abilities; the Spirit purposely distributes different skills to different people.

Why?

As verse 7 says, it is for the common good. When we have different gifts, when no one has all the abilities, then we need to work together, and that in itself is good for us.

One body with many parts (verses 12-16)

Paul compares the church to a human body: “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ”—that is, with the body of Christ, the church. Paul is still stressing diversity

within one body. The Corinthians needed to know about that diversity, because some of them said that everyone should have one gift in particular—tongues—and they looked down on people who did not have that gift.

Paul explains the body analogy: “For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” The Spirit places people of all ethnic and social groups together. We have a common origin and a common purpose, but (Paul reminds us again) we are not identical: “Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.”

Paul insists that all the parts are needed: “Now if the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.” Similarly, if a person who did not speak in tongues should say, “Because I do not speak in tongues, I do not belong here,” Paul would respond: “That does not disqualify you—you are still part of the body.”

Similarly, “And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.” If someone thinks that they don’t belong because they lack the gift of miracles, then Paul says: “You are part of the body anyway; that is no reason to drop out.”

Variety is necessary (verses 17-20)

Paul develops the analogy further: “If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?” He is saying, in effect, “If everyone in the church had the gift of tongues, who would be doing the prophecy? If everyone had the gift of miracles, who would have the wisdom?”

Paul stresses diversity: “But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part,

where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.” We cannot turn a gift into a requirement for acceptance, because God has distributed different roles to different people. There are many parts to play within the body of Christ.

All parts are needed (verses 21-27)

Earlier, Paul encouraged the people who felt left out. Now he addresses those who look down on others: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’” “People who speak in tongues should not think that they have everything they need.

One person might say, “I don’t need prophecy, because I have tongues. I don’t need discernment, because the only gift that counts is the one that I have.” But Paul says, “We need every part, and every person.” God puts his people into a body, into a community of people in which we need to work together to help each other.

“On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor.” Is this true in the church today? Do we give special honor to people who are weak, who are not in the limelight?

“And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment.” Do we take special efforts for church members who are less glamorous in the eyes of the world? Paul wants us to make sure we include everyone, and to make everyone feel an important part of the body—because everyone *is* important.

“But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.” God wants his children to love one another, no matter which gifts they have or lack. We should not separate into the haves and the have-nots; we are all in this together, and we are to

help one another and learn from one another.

What does “equal concern” look like? Paul will say more about that in the next chapter. Here he gives one example: “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.” Our sorrows and our successes are shared; we support those who suffer, and congratulate those who have blessings. Someday the tide will turn, so everything will work best if we stick together, each doing the part God has given us to do.

Paul summarizes it: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” Everyone belongs, and all the parts need to work together.

The Greeks Had a Word for It

χάρισμα

In English, a person who has “charisma” has a personality that seems to attract followers. But for Paul, everyone has been given a *charisma*, because for him the word meant a gift, something given by the grace (*charis*) of God. When God delivered Paul from danger, it was a *charisma* (2 Cor. 1:11). His ability to be celibate was another *charisma* from God (1 Cor. 7:7).

But *charismata* (the plural form of *charisma*) are best known as the special abilities God’s Spirit distributes to his people (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:4; 1 Pet. 4:10). Churches that emphasize these gifts are often called *charismatic* churches.

But actually, all Christians can be called charismatic, because we all believe that “the gift [*charisma*] of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). Salvation is the greatest gift, given to all.

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## The Most Excellent Way: 1 Corinthians 13

The church in first-century Corinth was plagued with social divisions and rivalries. Paul explained to them that God gives different people different abilities—not so that some people can exalt themselves over others, but so that everyone will work together for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7). No one is self-sufficient, and no one is unnecessary.

Near the end of chapter 12, he again explains that God appoints different roles in the church. He asks, Is everyone in the church an apostle? Of course not, he implies. It's silly to expect everyone to have the same role (vv. 28-30).

Nevertheless, some gifts are better than others, and Paul encourages the Corinthians to “eagerly desire the greater gifts” (v. 31). But even if they get better gifts, how are they to use them? He explains: “And now I will show you the most excellent way.”

This superior pathway, he says in chapter 13, is the way of love. Love is not a gift that some people have and others don't—it is the way in which *all* gifts should be used. This is what the Corinthians needed most. Indeed, without love, all the other gifts were pointless.

### **Without love, we are nothing (verses 1-3)**

Paul begins with the spiritual gift that the Corinthians valued the most: “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.” No matter how special the words are, if they aren't helping anyone, they are just noise.

“If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.” Eloquent preaching, deep wisdom and strong faith are all wasted if they are not being used to help others.

“If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.” Even great sacrifices, if done for selfish purposes, fail to do anything for us. Selfish actions, no matter how good they appear on the outside, do not improve our standing in the eyes of God.

### **A description of love (verses 4-8)**

Real love is not proven through spectacular performances. Rather, it is demonstrated in much smaller things we do in everyday life: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.”

This is a description of God himself, and this is the life that the Father, Son, and Spirit enjoy with one another. This is the life God wants us to enjoy forever—and the life he wants us to have now, as well.

Love “does not dishonor others,” Paul says. “It is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.” God encourages us to participate in this life now: freed of selfishness, fits of anger and grudges.

The reason that God wants us to live this way is because this is the way God already is. He does not keep a record of wrongs—he has already forgiven us for everything we’ve done. He does not tell us to do something he has not already done himself.

“Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.” Unfortunately, *we* often fail. Paul is describing a way that we, of ourselves, cannot achieve. But Christ in us has already achieved it, and God wants us to participate with Christ in his perfect life by trusting him and letting him live in us.

### **Love is eternal (verses 9-13)**

Paul makes a quick comparison between love, which is eternal, and the spiritual gifts favored by the Corinthians: “But where there are prophecies,

they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.”

After the return of Christ and everything is made right, love will still be an essential part of life. But in that perfect age, there will be no need for prophecies or tongues. When we all have knowledge, there is no need for a “gift of knowledge.” Those things will pass away; they are temporary.

Paul then compares this to stages in human development that we are already familiar with: “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.” Prophecy, tongues, and other gifts are designed for the immature, for those who live in this age; they (unlike love) are not part of mature life in the kingdom of God.

“For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” Our life, even the best spiritual life, is on a far lower level than what we will later enjoy. We know only a fraction of what that future life will be like, but God knows exactly what we are now, and what we need to be; we can trust him to work it out for our good.

In the end, three virtues will still be needed: “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” This is what we all need most, because it describes the life of God himself, the life he wants us to participate in now and forever.

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### **The Greeks Had a Word for It**

Ancient Greek had several words for love: *erōs* for erotic love, *philos* for love between equals, *storgē* for the love of parents and children, and *agapē*. Although the verb form of *agapē* was common, often as a synonym for other

types of love, the noun was rare.

This changed when Jews in Alexandria translated the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek. They preferred the word *agapē*, and by using it to describe God's love for his people, they gave it a more distinctive meaning. It was associated with the goodwill and generosity of a person in power toward one without power. It was a love that was freely given, without expecting things in return except for gratitude and loyalty.

When the New Testament was written, *agapē* was again chosen to describe the kind of love that God has for his people, and the kind of love that he wants his people to have toward one another: a love that is freely given, whether or not the other person is able to give any favors in return. Because it never keeps track of failures, it is a love that never ceases to be given.

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# **The Gift of Prophecy:**

## **A Study of 1 Corinthians 14:1-12**

The early Christians in Corinth were fascinated with spiritual gifts. After telling them to “desire the greater gifts” (12:31), Paul described to them “the most excellent way”—love (13:1-13). Paul then weighed the relative merits of two spiritual gifts—one the Corinthians had over-valued, and one that they did not value enough. This problem warranted considerable space in Paul’s letter.

### **Prophecy better than tongues (14:1-5)**

“Follow the way of love, he writes, “and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy.” What is this gift of prophecy? We will see more when Paul describes its benefits. The point is that the Corinthians should value it more highly.

Tongues is a valid gift. So why should anyone want a different gift? Paul explains: “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. But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort.”

When people speak in tongues, they cannot be understood. What good does that do? Paul answers: “Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves.” There is a private benefit.

“But the one who prophesies edifies the church.” This is the contrast Paul is making: prophecy helps other people, but tongues do not. If believers love others and want to help others, they should value prophecy over tongues.

Prophecy strengthens, encourages and comforts people. It builds them up in the faith and teaches them. Many scholars conclude that it is what we now call preaching.

Tongues are good, but prophesying is much better. “I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would *rather* have you prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues...so that the church may be edified.” The entire worship service should focus on edification: “Everything must be done so that the church may be built up” (14:26).

### **A clear message (verses 6-12)**

“If I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction?” Tongues would not be understood, but prophecy is given in language that people understand.

“In the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the pipe or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying?”

If no one understands the words, they might as well all be the same syllable: “da-da-da-da-da-da.” It might inspire the speaker, but it doesn’t do anything for anyone else. Paul wants them to speak words that can be understood.

“There are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker is a foreigner to me. So it is with you.”

The much-vaunted gift of tongues wasn’t doing the Corinthian church any good. It had become a point of rivalry, pride and division. It was not helping the people join together as the family of God, the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit.

It's good to desire spiritual gifts, Paul concludes, but for the good of the church, believers need to focus on a different gift: "Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church." Seek to be a person who helps others understand the words of God.

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## **The Greeks Had a Word for It**

### ***Prophēteuo***

The word *prophēteuo* is a combination of the prefix *pro-*, meaning "before" and the root *phe-*, referring to speech. *Prophēteuo* means to speak publicly, or to speak of something before it happens. Moses was a prophet (Deut. 34:10), and although he made some predictions, his greater role was to tell people about their current responsibilities.

The later Israelite prophets spoke about the future not as mere predictions, but as words of judgment about the behavior of the people in their own day. When Jonah warned Nineveh of impending destruction, the people repented, and the city survived (Jonah 3:10). As a prediction, the prophecy failed, but as a warning about the present, it achieved its purpose.

When soldiers asked Jesus to prophesy about who hit him (Luke 22:64), they were not asking for a prediction, but for evidence that showed he had supernatural knowledge. When Paul wrote about prophecy in Corinth, he referred to speech that was divinely inspired to instruct and strengthen others.

Spiros Zodhiates defines a prophet: "not primarily one who foretells things to come, but who (having been taught of God) speaks out of His will" (*The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, page 1244).

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Are You Out of Your Mind?

A Study of 1 Corinthians 14:13-25

The believers in Corinth liked to speak in tongues, but Paul encouraged them to focus instead on gifts that build up the church. He explains why the gift of prophesying is better than tongues for use in church meetings.

Does anyone understand? (verses 13-17)

Believers meet together in order to build one another up (v. 26). But tongues are of private value; they do not help others. So Paul exhorts, “the one who speaks in a tongue should pray that they may interpret what they say.” If they speak in tongues, they should desire that their words be explained.

“For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.” People who speak in tongues edify themselves (v. 4), but their minds are not producing any other fruit, or any other results.

Paul asks, “So what shall I do?” What is the practical action in this situation? It is to pray *and* to be fruitful: “I will pray with my spirit, but I will *also* pray with my understanding.” Tongues edify the speaker in a non-cognitive way, but they do not help others understand.

“I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding.” Will he alternate between tongues one minute and interpretation the next? Perhaps. But he can pray with his spirit or sing with his spirit *and* with understanding all at the same time, with normal words.

“Otherwise when you are praising God in the Spirit [in tongues], how can someone else, who is now put in the position of an inquirer, say ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying?” If other people don’t know what the words mean, they cannot indicate agreement. They are like outsiders, excluded from the praise.

“You are giving thanks well enough, but no one else is edified.” Tongues are good for private use, but not for public praise and prayer.

Do people respond with belief? (verses 18-25)

Paul knows both sides of the issue: “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.” Even though Paul spoke tongues privately, he says, “in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.” Church meetings are a place for instruction, not for using a gift that does not edify others.

He chides them, “Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.” When they use a spiritual gift for self-exaltation, they are being childish.

Tongues do not help other believers, but could they help unbelievers? To address that point, Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11-12: “With other tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.”

Isaiah was talking about the Jews being conquered by enemy nations, and in that circumstance God used other languages to speak to the people, who were essentially unbelievers. But they did not respond to Babylonian words any better than they did to Hebrew words. Paul concludes: “Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers...”

“Prophecy, however, is not for unbelievers but for believers.” When God inspires people to prophesy, he speaks to people who will respond. It is the same in the church, Paul implies. Prophecy, or inspired words of instruction, is the appropriate gift for speaking to believers.

“If the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?” The visitors would hear many sounds, but would also see that no one understood anyone else. It would seem pointless, and it could repel them.

“But if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all, as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare.” Prophecy helps people understand what sin is, and helps them admit they fall short and need a Savior.

So it leads to conversion and belief: “They will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’” Prophecy is the appropriate gift to help unbelievers, too.

The Greeks Had a Word for It

οικοδομή

Oikodomē comes from Greek words for “house” and “build.” It may be used in its literal sense, for constructing a house, or repairing a building. But it is often used in a figurative way, as a metaphor for helping people. Paul uses it in 1 Cor. 14:26: “Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.” He is not talking about constructing a building—he is referring to helping other people.

But what does it mean to “build” another person? *The Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* gives this paraphrase: “to increase the potential of someone or something, with focus upon the process involved – ‘to strengthen, to make more able, to build up.’” In 2 Cor. 13:10, Paul refers to his God-given authority “for building you up, not for tearing you down.”

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# **One at a Time, Please:**

## **A Study of 1 Corinthians 14:26-39**

What did first-century believers do in their worship meetings? The Bible gives us only a few glimpses into the details. Paul gives a description in 1 Corinthians 14:26: “When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation.” Every believer had a part to play, each according to the way that God had gifted them.

### **Speaking in turn**

However, it seems that all the believers in Corinth wanted to use their gifts at the same time, and their meetings had become chaotic. One person was singing, another speaking in tongues, a third trying to deliver a message—but no one was listening to anyone else. Everyone was empowered to speak, and that was good. But when everyone spoke at once, the gifts were not producing the desired results.

So Paul gives them a basic principle: “Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.” Spiritual gifts are given for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7), and they should strengthen the church. People should be taught, and a sense of community should grow.

Based on this foundational principle, Paul gives instructions: “If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God” (vv. 27-28).

When God inspires people to speak, he does not cause everyone to speak at once. Rather, he expects them to restrain themselves so that their gift is used at a time when it can be effective. It may mean waiting for someone else to finish, or until an interpreter is present.

Tongues are not appropriate in church, he says, unless someone is there to interpret the words. And do not expect everyone to speak in tongues—no more than three should speak at each meeting. If more people feel inspired to speak in tongues, then they can wait until the next week.

### **Not a God of disorder**

Paul gives similar guidelines for the gift of prophecy: “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 can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged” (vv. 29-31).

How do people “weigh carefully” what is said? The Greek word means to discern, to make a decision. People are to decide whether these are words of God, or not. Was this done by each person silently, or did it involve discussion? We do not know.

The first speaker must be willing to cut the message short if someone else is inspired to give an additional message. The meeting is not an oratory contest or an endurance contest, but a time for instruction and encouragement, a time to serve others rather than to seek attention for one’s self.

Paul gives another basic principle when he writes, “The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets” (v. 32). He has already implied that tongues-speakers should control their own gift; each person should use wisdom when using their gifts. Being “inspired” does not mean that everyone blurts out whatever they want, whenever they want. God gives gifts, but he also wants us to think about how and when we use those gifts.

“For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people” (v. 33). Paul’s other congregations were orderly, and he wanted Corinth to be orderly as well. He did not tell people to

stop using their gifts, but his guidelines would make their gifts more effective.

## **Women should (not) be silent**

Paul also calls for orderly worship among a third group—women—and these are among the most controversial words Paul ever wrote: “Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church” (vv. 34-35).

I cannot discuss all the details of the controversy here, but briefly, we may note that Paul already implied in chapter 11 that women were allowed to prophesy, presumably in public meetings. When he writes that women are to be *silent*, he did not mean a total and permanent prohibition, just as he did not mean a total prohibition when he used the same Greek word for tongues-speakers and prophets.

The problem in the Corinthian church meetings was not a problem of *who* was speaking, but of *when*. When everyone spoke at once, it was chaotic. Part of the problem was that women were talking. So Paul tells them to stop talking in church. He did not mean that they could not sing along with everyone else, or that they could not interpret tongues for someone else, or that they could not prophesy. Rather, just like everyone else, they were to cease all out-of-turn talking. (For more details, see our more detailed study of this passage, posted at <http://www.gci.org/church/ministry/women9>.)

Paul seems to express some frustration with the Corinthians when he asks, “Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?” (v. 36). The Corinthians claimed to be inspired, and acted as if they did not need any guidance from Paul or anyone else. They were using “inspiration” as an excuse for their own excesses.

Paul wants them to see the bigger picture, that they are not the only believers on the planet, and they do not have a perfect pipeline to God. Just as God can inspire the Corinthians, so he can also inspire Paul—but that does not mean that the Corinthians were responding to the Spirit just as accurately as Paul was. Paul had a special conversion, a special commission, and many more years of experience with the Spirit.

“If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command. But if anyone ignores this, they will themselves be ignored” (vv. 37-38). Paul is invoking his God-given authority over his churches.

Paul concludes the chapter: “Be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (vv. 39-40). We might summarize it this way:

- Be eager to speak words that instruct, encourage, and build people up.
- Tongues are not wrong in themselves, but they can (like most other gifts) be used wrongly.
- Meetings should be orderly, so they can strengthen the church.

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## **The Greeks Had a Word for It**

### **τάξις**

*Taxis* comes from *tassō*, which means “to arrange.” *Taxis* usually conveys the idea of a sequence. We get the English word *taxonomy* from this word.

In Luke 1:8, *taxis* is used to say that Zechariah’s division was “on duty.” It was the turn for his group to serve. *Taxis* is used more often in Hebrews, to say that Jesus is a priest in the “order” of Melchizedek.

Paul uses *taxis* in 1 Cor. 14:40 to say that worship meetings should be orderly. The context shows that Paul is concerned with sequence—that people speak one after another, each in their own turn.

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# The Use and Misuse of Spiritual Gifts

By Joseph Tkach

We have come to a greater awareness of the spiritual gifts God gives his people. We understand from Scripture some basic points:

- Every member has at least one spiritual gift, usually two or three.
- Every member should be using his or her gifts to serve others in the church.
- No member has all the gifts, so we need each other.
- No gift is given to all members.
- God decides who receives which gift.

Every member ought to be involved in some ministry, some area of service (“ministry” refers to all types of service, not just pastoral work). Every Christian should be using his or her gifts to serve others “for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7; 1 Pet. 4:10).

This awareness of spiritual gifts has been a great blessing for members and congregations. However, even good things can be misused, and a few problems have developed in connection with spiritual gifts. These problems are not unique to us, of course, and it is sometimes helpful to see how other Christian leaders have dealt with them.

For example, some people use the concept of spiritual gifts as an excuse to refuse to serve others. For example, they say that their gift is administration and they refuse to do anything except try to meddle in how the church is administered. Or they may claim to be a teacher and refuse to serve in any other way. I believe that this is the opposite of what Paul intended — he explained that God gifts people for service, not for refusal.

Sometimes work needs to be done whether anybody is especially gifted for it or not. Meeting halls need to be set up and cleaned up. Compassion



needs to be given when tragedies strike, whether or not you happen to have the gift of compassion. All members need to be able to teach (Col. 3:16) whether or not they have the gift of teaching. All members need to be able to explain the gospel (1 Pet. 3:15) whether or not they have the gift of evangelism.

It is unrealistic to think that every member will do only those forms of service for which he or she is specially gifted. Not only do other forms of service need to be done, each member needs to experience other forms of service. Service often requires that we get out of our comfort zones, out of the area in which we feel gifted. After all, God may be wanting to develop in us a gift we did not know we had!

Each person has one to three major gifts, and it is best if the person's primary area of service uses one or more of those primary gifts. But each person should also be willing to serve in other ways, as the church has needs. One large church uses the principle that, "you choose your primary ministry based on your own gifts, and be willing to serve in a secondary ministry based on the needs of others." Such a policy helps members grow — and the secondary ministries are assigned only for limited periods of time. Those less-desirable service roles are then rotated to other members. Some experienced pastors estimate that members can expect only about 60 percent of their service to be within their primary spiritual gifts.

The most important thing is that each member serve in some way. Service is a responsibility, not a matter of "I will accept it only if I like it."

### **Finding your gifts**

Now a few thoughts about how we determine what spiritual gifts we have. There are several approaches to this: 1) written tests, surveys and inventories, 2) self-analysis based on interests and experiences, and 3) confirmation from people who know you well. All three approaches can be helpful, and it is

especially helpful if all three lead to the same answer. But none of the three is infallible.

Some of the written inventories are simply a method of analyzing yourself and others' opinions about you. The questions might go like this: What do you like to do? What have you done well? What do other people say that you do well? What kinds of needs do you see in the church? (This last question is based on the observation that people are usually most aware of the needs that they are able to help with. For example, a person with the gift of compassion will think that the church needs more compassion.)

Often, we do not know our gifts until we have put them to use and seen whether we do well in that type of activity. Not only do gifts grow through experience, they can also be discovered through experience. That is why it is helpful for members to occasionally try different areas of service. They may learn something about themselves, as well as helping others.

Those are a few comments about gifts in general. But for the rest of this article, I want to focus on a particular gift that raises the most questions.

### **The gift of tongues**

Historically, the most controversial gift has been tongues. It was controversial on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem; it was controversial a few years later in Caesarea; it was controversial later on in Corinth. Throughout the centuries, small groups of Christians have occasionally spoken in tongues, almost always generating controversy.

Today, millions of Christians speak in tongues. Some are found in Roman Catholic churches, some in liberal mainstream groups, some in conservative evangelical churches, and many in Pentecostal denominations. Even though tongues-speaking has such diverse participants, it is still controversial. So now, I hope to give some perspective on this practice, both to help people who are afraid of it, and those who think too highly of this gift.

The modern resurgence of tongue-speaking is generally traced to the turn of the century. In 1900, Charles Parham and a small group in Kansas began to speak in tongues after studying about this gift in the Bible. In 1906, Parham went to Los Angeles and spoke at the Azusa Street Mission Revival (no connection with Azusa Pacific University), and the movement quickly spread from there.

In the early years, most denominations rejected tongues-speaking as lunacy or demonic, and as one might expect, tongues-speakers left such hostile churches and formed churches in which they were allowed and encouraged to speak in tongues. Thus Pentecostal denominations such as the Assemblies of God were formed.

There is no question that many of these Pentecostal churches had numerous theological errors. They made many mistakes in their zeal to follow God. As time went on, they learned more and corrected many of their errors. This is a dynamic that we should well understand.

In the 1960s, another wave of tongues-speaking occurred in more traditional churches. This time, many churches did not ridicule or drive these people away; they were accepted as charismatic sub-groups within the churches. Nevertheless, tongues-speaking is still controversial. Some Christians teach that God simply does not give miraculous gifts to anyone in the church today; yet others still claim that all Christians ought to seek and practice the gift of tongues.

As recounted in his Autobiography, Herbert Armstrong encountered some Pentecostal people in his early ministry, and he found them to be divisive. And after such experiences, he was strongly opposed to tongues-speaking, even though he was strongly in favor of other miraculous gifts, such as healing. We remained opposed to tongues for decades, and if anybody ever spoke in tongues, they kept pretty quiet about it.

But more recently, we have recognized that some Christians do indeed speak in tongues. We have been slower to criticize and more willing to consider the possibility that tongues-speaking may be an authentic gift of the Holy Spirit. Meanwhile, our members have visited tongues-speaking churches, and some of our members and ministers have begun to speak in tongues, usually in private.

Knowing how controversial tongues have been in other churches, and knowing our previous dogmatic rejection of tongues, it is no surprise that questions arise when some of our members and ministers begin to speak in tongues, even privately. Due to our lack of experience in this area, it is also no surprise that some excesses have occurred. New-found zeal sometimes carries people further than it should.

### **Information about tongues**

Since Scripture is our ultimate authority for doctrine and Christian living, it is essential that we understand what the Bible says about tongues. Here I will refer you to chapters 1-3 of this e-book. For those who want further study on this subject, there is a bibliography of helpful resources, written from several perspectives. I also refer you to the book *Are Miraculous Gifts For Today? Four Views*, edited by Wayne Grudem (Zondervan, 1996). I will not enter the detailed arguments addressed in the book, but I will simply affirm that I believe that God still performs miracles today. I see no biblical reason to think that he no longer gives anyone the ability to speak in tongues.

However, simply because someone “speaks in tongues” does not mean that he or she has this spiritual gift. As chapters 1-3 point out, various non-Christians, from ancient pagans to modern Buddhists, have spoken in tongues. Tongues-speaking, in itself, is no proof of anything. (Similarly, non-Christians may also have leadership, service, compassion, teaching and other abilities that are similar to spiritual gifts.)

Some tongues-speaking is also called ecstatic speech, which is a psychomotor function of the brain. In normal speech, two parts of the brain work together. In ecstatic speech, one part of the brain tells the mouth and tongue to speak, but the conscious portion of the brain does not supply any particular guidance for what words to speak, so unintelligible syllables come out. This can happen if a person is startled, for example, or if consciousness is altered in some way.

Also, some tongues-speaking may be done in imitation (perhaps subconsciously) of a respected leader. People who are seeking a particular experience are (like hypnotized people) psychologically very susceptible to suggestions like that.

However, I do not think that all tongues-speaking can be explained in these ways, and I believe that some tongues-speaking is genuinely a gift of God. I also recognize that God sometimes works through observable phenomena, and just because some tongues-speaking has a psychomotor explanation does not mean it isn't a gift.

As I have written before, the psychological state in which tongues-speaking occurs is usually pleasant. It is liberating to get rid of some of their inhibitions. It is encouraging to put oneself in a very responsive state, ready to respond to God working in their lives. Tongues-speaking is not the only way to do this, but it is one way, and it encourages people in their walk with the Lord.

One pastor observed the irony that most Christians can talk about almost any spiritual gift with nothing but praise, but as soon as tongues is mentioned, it has to be accompanied by all sorts of cautionary statements. I agree that this is an irony. All sorts of spiritual gifts can be misused, and cautions can be given for them all. But historically, and in our present experience, tongues causes the most problems and needs the most caution. But still, I affirm that it

is one of God's spiritual gifts, and it is therefore good.

I respect and honor Christians who speak in tongues; I respect and honor those who do not. I do not want to quench the Spirit; I do not want to “forbid speaking in tongues” (1 Cor. 14:39).

But I also want to follow what Paul said in the very next verse: “Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (v. 40). So let me address how tongues, if used, should be done in an orderly way. Again, since Scripture is our ultimate guide for doctrine and Christian living, let us examine what Scripture says about how tongues should be used.

### **Biblical data**

First, Paul reminds the Corinthians that God divides his gifts among his people (1 Cor. 12:8-11; 29-30). It is not realistic to expect everyone to speak in tongues — and yet that is what some Pentecostals unfortunately do. This is divisive today, just as it was in ancient Corinth.

When a Christian says, my gift is better than your gift, it is an insult to other Christians, and an insult to God. No one should feel superior about a spiritual gift, since no one deserves any of the gifts. The gifts are given to serve others, not to feel superior to others.

We do not need to seek the gift of tongues. We need to seek God, and let him decide which gift is best for us. Paul says we should seek the “more excellent way”— love (1 Cor. 12:31 and chapter 13)— or the gift of prophecy, which is speaking words of encouragement, comfort and edification (1 Cor. 14:1-4).

Without love, we are spiritually worthless, no matter what tongues we speak. It reminds me of the story of one person who attended a Pentecostal church for several years and became a lay leader in one of the ministries. Eventually it was learned that this leader had never spoken in tongues, and people were shocked that the leader was “deficient” in the Christian

experience! Yet the person drew a different conclusion from the situation: speaking in tongues made no discernible difference in the way a person lives. Even after years of being around a person, others simply could not know whether the person had ever spoken in tongues.

My friend Jack Hayford says he speaks in tongues in his prayers every day. That does not impress me, nor does he expect it to. That is not its purpose. Tongues is not a show of spirituality. It is to edify the self, not to impress others (v. 4). If it edifies the self, that's wonderful. If it is done to impress others, it's being used in a wrong way, a carnal way. Paul said he spoke in tongues a lot (v. 18). He knew what it meant to pray in words he did not understand (v. 14). But he also knew that this was not proof of spiritual greatness.

I don't care how often Jack speaks in tongues. What I care about is the way he lives the rest of his time. Does he live and function in love? Does he use his other gifts to edify the body of Christ? Does he walk humbly and give all glory to God? I think he sets a good example in all these areas. His tongues-speaking neither adds to nor takes away from his character as a Christian.

To use another example, I don't care whether you eat cereal or eggs for breakfast. Neither one makes you a better person. But I do care if you exalt your particular preference into a badge of betterness. "Everybody ought to be like me because I like the way I am." Such approaches are divisive and un-Christian. They also miss Paul's point, that God has distributed his gifts among his people and he wants them to work together in their diversity.

The Corinthian Christians had a lot of problems, and apparently the way they spoke in tongues was a problem in the church. Paul told them to stop being proud and arrogant. He told them to stop being self-centered. He told them to grow up and be more sensible (v. 20). But he did not tell them to stop

speaking in tongues.

However, he did lay down some regulations, and they were quite limiting. For example: Only one person should speak at a time (v. 27). Church services should not be a competition to see who can talk the most. The Holy Spirit does not inspire more than one person to speak at a time.

Second, people should speak in tongues only if an interpreter is present (v. 28). Incidentally, it is interesting that many people want to speak in tongues, but not many “seek” the gift of interpretation, even though interpretation is of greater value to the church. I think this shows that tongues have been overvalued. Unfortunately, in some churches, tongues are often spoken without an interpreter present. The person simply speaks whether or not an interpreter is there, contrary to the instructions Paul gave.

And what if the speaker doesn’t know whether an interpreter is present? Then the speaker ought to remain silent. After all, if the gift is genuine, the speaker should be able to control it (v. 32). God does not bypass a person’s willpower. Indeed, part of the fruit of God’s Spirit is self-control (Gal. 5:23; 2 Tim. 1:7).

### **Balanced approach**

One Pasadena church that I know of has an interesting approach to tongues-speaking. People who want to practice this gift may do so — not during the regular church service, but in their own small group meetings. And then there must be two or more interpreters present. The interpreters write down the interpretation, and then they see whether the interpretations match. Sometimes they do, but often they do not, which means that at least one of the three speakers is mistaken. This cautions us not to be too quick to believe any uncorroborated interpretation — and certainly not if it contradicts Scripture!

It would just be a lot easier if people sought the gift of prophecy —



speaking edifying and intelligible words — rather than tongues, which might not help anybody else (v. 5). Tongues and interpretations are often misunderstood. Even prophecy can be misunderstood, which is why Paul advises us, “the others should weigh carefully what is said” (v. 29).

However, even if an interpreter is present, it is simply best not to speak in tongues in the church service. The gift of tongues is for self-edification, not for edifying anyone else (v. 4). It just doesn’t make sense for one member to interrupt everyone else and say, “Hold everything. Just wait a few minutes please while I edify myself. Watch me and listen to me, even though it won’t do you any good.” Tongues, since they help only the speaker, are appropriate for private prayers, but not for public assemblies.

Tongues are also a distraction. Public tongues-speaking almost always focuses attention on the speaker, not on God. Non-Christians are usually put off by tongues-speaking. Some find it quite fascinating, of course, and some even consider it to be proof of divine blessing, but most do not. It is confusing, and if the person realizes that various non-Christians also speak in tongues, it is also inconclusive. People need to be impressed by the gospel, not by unusual phenomena. If the person is convinced by emotional impressions rather than truth, the person has an unstable foundation for belief. Emotions are important, of course, but they should be a response to the gospel, not a substitute for it.

### **Our practice**

Paul warned the Corinthians not to allow tongues to get out of control in their worship services, since it could confuse unbelievers: “If the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?” (v. 23). It is not surprising, then, that some Christians also consider it inappropriate.

However, Paul had nothing against tongues-speaking. After all, he spoke in tongues himself (v. 18). But he did have a lot to say against tongues-speaking in church assemblies. “In the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue” (v. 19).

That is what we prefer. We want intelligible words; we do not want unintelligible words in our meetings. That is why I say that we are not a tongues-speaking fellowship. Some people in our fellowship speak in tongues, and I defend their privilege to do so in private or in small groups where everyone agrees to accept it. Even then, it needs to be controlled according to the scriptural guidelines.

As a fellowship, when we are gathered as a congregation, we do not want tongues-speaking. This is based not on some irrational fear of things we don’t understand — it is based on the guidance Paul has given us, guidance we accept as authoritative, as inspired by the Holy Spirit.

If somebody wants to speak in tongues in a worship service, there are other denominations that allow that sort of thing. If they find it to be self-edifying, that’s good, but I encourage them to seek and to use some other spiritual gift that will be helpful to others.

I might also add that even some Pentecostal churches do not allow tongues-speaking in church services. Many of them also recognize that it is unscriptural to allow everybody to speak at once, to speak without an interpreter present, etc. If the pastor were giving a sermon, for example, and a person in the audience began to speak in tongues, then the pastor would tell the person, “Lady (or Sir), control your gift. The spirits of the prophets are subject to the control of prophets. If you cannot control your gift, the ushers will escort you out.” Interrupting the sermon would be just as inappropriate as a person trying to sing a hymn in the middle of the sermon. It is good to

sing hymns, but only at the right time and place. Similarly, we do not allow tongues-speaking in our regular worship services.

### **Expressing joy in Christ**

I love our Pentecostal brothers and sisters a great deal. Many of you interact with them in ministerial associations, and you have also come to love them. Many of them have warmly embraced us as fellow-members in the family of God. The Four Square denomination in particular has been helpful to us. I praise their love for the Lord and their love for neighbor. Many of them set an excellent example.

Pentecostal churches are now the fastest-growing segment of Christianity, especially in Latin America, but also in North America, Europe and Asia. I suspect that one reason it is growing is that Pentecostal churches encourage people to express their emotions rather than suppress them. This can be bad, of course, if people's faith is built on emotions, but it is good if those emotions are a genuine response to the good news of Jesus Christ.

If people really understand the depths of their sinful state, of how utterly disgusting it is, and of the greatness of Jesus' sacrifice for us, of how astonishing his grace toward us is, then it is natural to respond with joy and exuberance — and this emotion does not need to be suppressed, though how it is expressed may vary widely from person to person. We have something worth singing about, something to be happy about. Although we may still be in poverty, we have experienced something wonderful in the love of Jesus Christ, and we share it.

Pentecostal churches are generally freer in how they express this joy. Visitors who attend a Pentecostal church are likely to see people expressing joy and happiness because of their faith in Jesus Christ. This example is an effective aid in evangelism and church growth.

Of course, Pentecostal churches are not the only ones who effectively

express their joy in worshiping their Savior, and they are not the only churches that are growing, but as a group, they seem to do it more actively than most. Although I do not agree with all their theology, and certainly not the emphasis on the public practice of tongues-speaking, I do applaud them for the things they are doing well.

Scripture is the ultimate authority for what we do. If growth alone were evidence of truth, then we might all become Muslims or Mormons. Experience may be helpful, but it is not authoritative. Experience may even be very impressive, but that alone does not make it authoritative. Even so, it is still very impressive.

### **Seeking experience**

Consider a not-so-unusual example, a person who attends a Protestant church every week, but rarely (if ever) experiences the presence of God in his or her own church services. He has doubts as to his own walk with the Lord. He wants to have greater assurance that he is making progress. He wants to have tangible, observable evidence that the Lord is with him. Then he attends a church in which the preacher confidently, boldly, dogmatically says that “yes, you can have confidence if you have a certain experience. That will give you the assurance of the presence of God in your life.”

The person wants this experience. It doesn't matter whether it is really proof — it is desirable. And once it comes, it is extremely self-authenticating and reinforcing. The person wanted reassurance, was told in a persuasive way that the particular experience would give him that assurance, and then he had the experience, and true enough, he gained assurance! The person becomes sold on the experience and sometimes even becomes an “evangelist” for the experience.

This has happened within our fellowship, just as it has happened in other denominations. People who were spiritually yearning, and not completely

grounded doctrinally, were overwhelmed by a particular experience. I do not doubt that the experience was powerful and spiritual. It may have been an enormous spiritual boost, or the highlight of one's life. But that does not mean that it is true, or that everyone should have the same experience, or that Christians should be looked down on if they do not have the same experience. The shock treatment that helped one patient is not the right medicine for the next patient.

### **More unusual manifestations**

For many years, speaking in tongues was the primary experience promoted in some Pentecostal circles. But in more recent years, more exotic experiences have been promoted — such things as being slain in the Spirit (fainting and remaining motionless for several hours), laughing in the Spirit (uncontrollable waves of laughter), weeping in the Spirit, barking like a dog, or other para-normal activities. These may be called the Toronto Blessing or the Pensacola Blessing or some other blessing. Several prominent speakers, including Benny Hinn, have promoted some of these exciting phenomena.

These phenomena have been controversial, even in Pentecostal churches. The Toronto Blessing, for example, began in the Vineyard church. Some Vineyard churches promoted the blessing; others resisted it, and now they have split into two denominations. But the blessing makes ripples in many other denominations, too, and has affected some members. The Pensacola Blessing has circulated primarily in the Assemblies of God, but it has also affected other denominations, including our own.

I do not doubt that these experiences are extremely powerful. They feel authentic. But they have unfortunately led some astray, away from biblical authority and into an authority that is based on personal experience. As an extreme example, a pastor who has become enamored with a particular blessing may exhort everyone in the congregation to seek this particular

blessing (the blessing, it sometimes seems, gets more focus than Jesus does). He may publicly berate those who do not accept the experience. He may call out names or tell people to leave if they don't like it.

This is, to put it bluntly, legalism. (Sometimes it is easy to call things we don't like an insulting term, like "legalism," but I am confident that in this case I am using the term legalism correctly. It is teaching as a requirement something that is not in Scripture.) We've had experience with old covenant legalism. These people are experiencing a completely nonbiblical legalism. Legalism is unfortunately found in many segments of Christianity, and some of these "blessing" people have fallen into a form of legalism, in which they insist that everybody ought to be like them.

Now suppose the whole congregation got touched and remained unconscious for three hours. Would that make them better Christians, better followers of Jesus Christ? Jesus never did anything of the sort. People who are slain in the spirit do not come out any better than they went in. The experience may encourage them, reassure them, but it does not edify the body of Christ and it should not be promoted as normal or preferable. Would these people eventually yearn for something yet more exotic? At least for some, that has been the pattern. Since the experience is not grounded in any objective truth, it does not give people the solid assurance that they seek. Some eventually seek even more unusual "signs."

One of our pastors observed the results of the Pensacola revival at a nearby Pentecostal church. After an initial flurry of excitement, attendance gradually dropped in half. The same manifestations week after week simply did not build the people up. The focus was on what happened to people during church, and not on what they did the rest of the time. The "revival" has driven away half the church!

Many of the "blessing" people are Christians who love Jesus. But as we

know from our own experience, it is quite possible to be Christian while also seriously wrong on major doctrinal questions. I do not want to bash and condemn. I do not attack the people, or call them agents of Satan, but I do have the responsibility, as an under-shepherd of Jesus Christ, to warn our members about false, destructive and divisive doctrines. I want to help people avoid the pain and suffering that comes from following religious errors. The truth sets people free, but errors lead people into bondage.

We do not speak in tongues in our worship services, and we do not promote the more exotic “Pentecostal” manifestations.

To use an analogy, what you eat for breakfast is your own business — but no matter how good it tastes to you, do not act like your choice is spiritually better than other people’s. Do not try to get everyone to act like you do. If you have a particular gift, be thankful and rejoice, but do not be divisive. Whatever gift you have, use it to serve others, keeping Scripture as your ultimate authority for faith and practice.

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## **Spiritual Gifts and Church Growth**

Christ gives each of us grace, in the form of spiritual gifts, as he determines to apportion it (Eph. 4:7). These gracious gifts include various roles within the church — apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (verse 11). And what are these leaders supposed to do? They are to “prepare God’s people for works of service” (verse 12). A more literal translation is “a work of ministry.” In other words, the leaders of the church are to prepare the members for action in the work of the ministry of the gospel.

But not everyone has been given the gift of preaching, any more than all parts of a body are mouths. Acts 6:2-4 describes two overall types of ministry in the work of the gospel: the ministry of tables, and the ministry of the Word — giving physical nourishment through service and giving spiritual nourishment by preaching and teaching the gospel. Both kinds of ministry are essential to the church.

### **Gifts to work together**

Christ gives different gifts to different members of the Body. Our job is not to compare our gifts and abilities, nor to feel superior or inferior to other members of the Body, but to make use of our respective gifts to serve others. Our works of service are to be used for building up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12).

As we work together, each of us serving according to the gifts and opportunities Christ gives us, we will grow into “unity in the faith” (verse 13). Although there is only one faith (verse 5), God’s people reach unity of the faith through works of service, ministering to one another’s needs in Christ.

Further, it is only through mutual service that we all reach unity “in the



faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God” (verse 13). Our faith is in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Part of knowing him is doing what he said. Two of his most frequent commands are, first, that we believe on him and, second, that we love one another. Belief in Christ makes us Christian, and love for one another demonstrates the validity of our faith. Belief and love are hallmarks of our Christian identity. Indeed, mutual love is the primary means by which the public can know that we are his disciples (John 13:35). Love, of course, is not just a feeling — it is action. It results in works of service.

By living the way of love in Christ, by implementing mutual service in him, the church comes to maturity, “attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). Through mutual love and service, we become mature in the faith, closer to what Christ wants us to be, closer to the example of service he set for us. With that maturity, Paul says, we will not be easily misled by erroneous teachings (verse 14).

But by speaking the truth (in this context, true doctrines) in love, we will grow up — become mature — into Jesus Christ (verse 15). Jesus himself is the goal.

From Christ, the church grows up “as each part does its work” (Eph. 4:16). Jesus has given a variety of gifts to the members of the Body as it pleases him, so that each of us can use our respective gifts as a vital part of the Body — in service, in the work of the ministry, to help each other. It is in this way that the church “builds itself up in love” (same verse). In the Body of Christ, as in any healthy body, each part contributes in its appropriate way to the overall growth, development, maintenance, and work of the Body as a whole.

### **For the common good**

We find a similar emphasis on mutual service in 1 Corinthians 12, where Paul also discusses spiritual gifts. There is only one Spirit, Paul says, but

there are different kinds of gifts (verse 4). There is only one Lord, but there are different kinds of service (verse 5). As members of the Body of Christ, we serve in different ways, each according to the gifts Christ has given us through the Spirit. There is only one God, but he leads and equips each of us to do the kinds of work that please him (verse 6). These spiritual gifts are distributed “for the common good” (verse 7), in other words, for the overall healthy functioning of the Body.

If he had wanted to, God could have given each of us ability to do everything, but he did not. He distributes his gifts differently to each of us, and this means we have to work *together*. Working together is, in a way, just as important as getting the job done — because working together in Christ is an expression of God’s love, which itself is part of the work of God. God is love, and he wants us to grow in love for one another.

Some spiritual gifts are spectacular; others are not. That fact can lead to pride, or to feelings either of superiority or inferiority. But Paul’s point in this passage is that all gifts are *from God*, and he is the one who distributes them *as it pleases him, as he desires and determines best*. Therefore, none of us has any reason to boast or to think our particular gift is more important than another, or to think our gift shows that *we* are more important than others. And, on the other side of the coin, no one has any reason to feel inferior, or to feel that his or her gift is not so important.

The truth is, Paul explains, each person has at least one gift or ability given by God, and each person has the responsibility to use it for the common good of the Body of Christ. I hope we can begin to see why mutual service, cooperation and love are vital to the health and growth of the church.

Just as a human body has to have a variety of parts, the church of God must have a variety of members, each doing a variety of functions for the common good. Every member can have faith, but some have an unusual gift

of faith (verse 9). Every member can be a personal witness to the life-transforming power of the gospel, but some have the gift of evangelizing unbelievers. Every member can teach others, but some have the gift of being an unusually effective teacher (verse 28). Every member can help others (same verse), but some have an unusual ability to help others.

Paul does not list every possible gift here. He could not, because they are too numerous to mention. There could be as many gifts as there are people in the church! God distributes them according to his own purpose and plan.

### **Use gifts in love**

Seek the best gifts, Paul encourages us (verse 31), and then he shows us in the love chapter “the most excellent way.” Each member, no matter what gift he or she may have, should seek to express love for others — that is how *every* gift should be used — in loving service to others. Whatever God gives us, whether it is physical or spiritual, should be used for others’ benefit.

We are called to serve. We exist to serve. That is Christian maturity. And our works of service should point to Christ. They should give evidence that we are his disciples. They are done for his honor and glory, and in his name. We do not deserve any of the credit ourselves. It is *his* work in us. It is Christ in us that identifies us as his own disciples. We are his slaves, with all being done in service to him in the work of his gospel.

We need to train and mobilize our congregations for the work of the gospel — evangelism. We need to develop positive godly relationships with others through Christian love and service, as individual Christians and as local congregations. This means pure, holy living in Jesus Christ as his ambassadors. It means being ready, when asked, to give an answer about the hope that lies within us, and about living in such a way that we are more likely to be asked. We should remember the first part of 1 Peter 3:15: “In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord.”

Evangelism means the whole Body of Christ working together in unity, each one doing his or her part according to the gifts God has given, whether in ministries of physical service or of teaching the Word, supervised and led by the local pastor and supported by headquarters, all to the glory of God in the work of the gospel. It means diligent, prayerful, focused effort, by one and all, in unified cooperation and mutual encouragement and strengthening in love, so that the light of Christ might shine in the darkness through us, as his faithful servants.

Paul, speaking to the elders from Ephesus, said, “However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me — the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24). The same is true of God’s elect today. *The Body of Christ lives to do the work of Christ, to proclaim and exemplify the gospel of the grace of God.*

### **Spiritual gifts for the gospel**

Look around — not only are the fields white and ready for harvest, there are already many laborers in the fields. The main problem is, they aren’t all laboring! The work of harvesting is not reserved for the ordained ministers alone — all members are encouraged to participate in the harvest. Many already are, but we need to expand the role of the members.

Jesus commands us to make disciples. He commands us to teach and to help each Christian mature in the faith. Therefore, we want to help our members grow in grace and knowledge, and to recognize and use the gifts that the Holy Spirit is giving them. God places members in the body as it pleases him, and he gives them gifts for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:4-27). Therefore, for the maximum growth and health of the church, we want each member to use his or her gifts, working together, being led by Jesus Christ to build the church up (Ephesians 4:11-16).

There is much that we could say about spiritual gifts. Right now we can highlight a few simple facts:

The Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to each member (1 Cor. 12:11).

These gifts are for the common good (verse 7).

There are many types of gifts (verses 8-11).

All gifts help the body of Christ function (verses 12-18).

No one should envy another member's gifts (verses 15-17).

No one should despise another member's gifts (verses 21-23).

Therefore, the members should have concern for one another (verse 25).

Gifts should be used, not hidden under a basket (Matthew 5:15-16).

Ministers should prepare members for works of service (Eph. 4:11-12).

Works of service build up the body of Christ (verse 12).

Our goal is unity in the faith and knowledge of Christ (verse 13).

Christ is the full measure of Christian maturity (verse 13).

Only in that maturity will we have doctrinal stability (verse 14).

Our goal is to grow up into our Head, Jesus Christ (verse 15).

From Christ, we build ourselves up in love (verse 16).

We grow as each member does his or her work (verse 16).

Therefore, we encourage members to do the work God has called them to do. We want them to use the gifts God has given. This mutual service is what builds the church internally, helps it function in its mission and helps it grow by attracting and incorporating new members. Every member has a role in ministering to others. But each member must perform that role in such a way that it builds up the whole body, not tears down the body. We do not all serve in the same way, evangelize in the same way, show compassion in the same way, etc. Everyone cannot be forced into the same pattern or mold, but we are to work together in our diverse approaches.

This is part of the great commission. Jesus told his disciples to make

disciples and teach them to obey everything he commanded them (Matthew 28:19-20). It is to be an endless cycle: The disciples become disciplers. Those who are taught become teachers. We all do this in different ways, of course, according to the gifts God supplies, but we all have a part to play in the work of the body of Christ.

Each member should serve. Each member should minister (which simply means “to give aid or service”) to others. Each member has a ministry, that is, a way in which God has gifted him or her to serve in the kingdom work of the church. Each member is a minister of Jesus Christ. The church is a royal priesthood, Peter wrote (1 Peter 2:9), and each member has a priestly role, interceding in prayer for others, serving one another’s needs, bearing one another’s burdens and sharing in the work of the gospel.

We want all members to grow and participate in the work. We do not have the money to hire every worker, of course, nor should we want to. The Bible presents a picture of every member doing some work. Church pastors serve in the role of administrative leadership, facilitating the work of Christ’s loved ones — casting the joyous vision of their calling to Christ’s kingdom, praying for them, training them, developing them, empowering them, encouraging them, advising them, supporting them — and, of course, preaching the word — all supervised by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit and the Holy Scriptures.

We have much to do — so much that it usually seems overwhelming. That’s because we often only see with physical eyes. But when we look with the eyes of faith, we are assured of Jesus’ promise: He has unlimited power, and he is with us always (verses 18, 20). He will turn our trials into good, our tears into joy. We are thankful for that, and thankful to be called into the work of the King of kings. Like the Samaritan leper, we fall on our knees before Jesus and praise the Lord for what he has done for us! We have been

cleansed, and like Isaiah, we say: “Here I am, O Lord. Send me!” (Isaiah 6:5-8).

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# **Spiritual Gifts Are Given for Service**

We understand from Scripture some basic points about the spiritual gifts God gives his people:

- Every member has at least one spiritual gift, usually two or three.
- Every member should be using his or her gifts to serve others in the church.
- No member has all the gifts, so we need each other.
- No gift is given to all members.
- God decides who receives which gift.

We have always had spiritual gifts — but only recently have we become aware of them to the point that we realized that every member ought to be involved in some ministry, some area of service (“ministry” refers to all types of service, not just pastoral work). Every Christian should be using his or her gifts to serve others “for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7; 1 Pet. 4:10).

This awareness of spiritual gifts has been a great blessing for members and congregations. However, even good things can be misused, and a few problems have developed in connection with spiritual gifts. These problems are not unique to us, of course, and it is sometimes helpful to see how other Christian leaders have dealt with them.

## **Refusing to serve**

For example, some people use the concept of spiritual gifts as an excuse to refuse to serve others. For example, they say that their gift is administration and they refuse to do anything except try to meddle in how the church is administered. Or they may claim to be a teacher and refuse to serve in any other way. I believe that this is the opposite of what Paul intended — he explained that God gifts people for service, not for refusal.

Sometimes work needs to be done whether anybody is especially gifted



for it or not. Meeting halls need to be set up and cleaned up. Compassion needs to be given when tragedies strike, whether or not you happen to have the gift of compassion. All members need to be able to teach (Col. 3:16) whether or not they have the gift of teaching. All members need to be able to explain the gospel (1 Pet. 3:15) whether or not they have the gift of evangelism.

It is unrealistic to think that every member will do only those forms of service for which he or she is *specialty* gifted. Not only do other forms of service need to be done, each member needs to experience other forms of service. Service often requires that we get out of our comfort zones, out of the area in which we feel gifted. After all, God may be wanting to develop in us a gift we did not know we had!

Most people have been given one to three major gifts, and it is best if the person's primary area of service uses one or more of those primary gifts. But each person should also be willing to serve in other ways, as the church has needs. One large church uses the principle that, "you choose your primary ministry based on your own gifts, and be willing to serve in a secondary ministry based on the needs of others." Such a policy helps members grow — and the secondary ministries are assigned only for limited periods of time. Those less-desirable service roles are then rotated to other members. Some experienced pastors estimate that members can expect only about 60 percent of their service to be within their primary spiritual gifts.

The most important thing is that each member serve in some way. Service is a responsibility, not a matter of "I will accept it only if I like it."

### **Finding your gifts**

Now a few thoughts about how we determine what spiritual gifts we have. There are several approaches to this: 1) written tests, surveys and inventories, 2) self-analysis based on interests and experiences, and 3) confirmation from

people who know you well. All three approaches can be helpful, and it is especially helpful if all three lead to the same answer. But none of the three is infallible.

Some of the written inventories are simply a method of analyzing yourself and others' opinions about you. The questions might go like this: What do you like to do? What have you done well? What do other people say that you do well? What kinds of needs do you see in the church? (This last question is based on the observation that people are usually most aware of the needs that they are able to help with. For example, a person with the gift of compassion will think that the church needs more compassion.)

Often, we do not know our gifts until we have put them to use and seen whether we do well in that type of activity. Not only do gifts grow through experience, they can also be discovered through experience. That is why it is helpful for members to occasionally try different areas of service. They may learn something about themselves, as well as helping others.

### **Gifts and fruit of the Holy Spirit**

The gifts of the Spirit are God-given abilities distributed as God knows is best for different aspects of Christian service. Not every Christian has the same gift, just as not every part of the human body performs the function of seeing, hearing or walking (1 Corinthians 12:14-26). Through a division of labor, God encourages us to work with one another to be more efficient. As we work together, Christ gives his church growth (Ephesians 4:15-16).

What are the various gifts? Paul lists some in 1 Corinthians 12:28-30: Church leadership positions such as apostle, prophet and teacher, or gifts of miracles and healings, or less spectacular but equally necessary abilities such as helping others and administration.

Another list is in verses 7-10: messages of wisdom or knowledge, faith and healing and miracles, inspired messages of prophecy, tongues or

interpretations, or a special gift for distinguishing between spirits. (The Greek word for “distinguishing” is also used in 14:29. This gift was probably used to tell which prophecies or tongue-interpretations were genuine and which were false.) The precise difference between wisdom and knowledge, or faith and healing and miracles may not be important in this list; Paul is simply making the point that spiritual gifts come in many varieties, although they are all “for the common good.”

Romans 12:6-8 gives yet another list of gifts (none of the lists is exhaustive): prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving to others, leading others or showing mercy. Some of these service gifts should be found in all Christians, but some people are distinctly better at certain activities than other people are. None of the lists in the Bible is complete, and various other abilities may also be spiritual gifts, such as the ability to write psalms (1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19).

As God gives us these abilities, we should apply them as best we can for the common good of the Body of Christ.

The gifts in these lists come in three major categories: church leadership, speaking, and serving others. Peter summarizes “gifts” under the categories of speaking and serving (1 Peter 4:11). “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms” (verse 10).

Paul said that God had given (the Greek verb is similar to the noun for “gift”) the Philippian Christians the ability to believe in Christ and also the opportunity to suffer for him (Philippians 1:29-30).

Suffering patiently and faithfully can also be a useful spiritual gift. Paul described a “thorn in my flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7), which served by emphasizing Paul’s weaknesses, therefore showing that the power of his message came not from himself but from God (verses 8-10).

Paul referred to marital status, whether married or not, as a gift (1 Corinthians 7:7). Any of life's circumstances can be considered a gift of God if we are able to use it to glorify Christ and serve others. It does not matter how spectacular or seemingly ordinary the gift is — what matters is how it is used (1 Corinthians 13:1-4). Love, a fruit of the Spirit that all Christians must have, is the test of whether an ability or gift is good.

All gifts should be used to glorify Christ and to benefit others.

### **Fruit of the Holy Spirit**

“Live by the Spirit,” Paul tells us in Galatians 5:16, not by the “desires of the sinful nature.” These phrases represent opposite approaches to life (verse 17). In verses 19-21, Paul describes some of the acts of the sinful nature, and in verses 22-23 he describes some of the fruit or results of the Holy Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

In Ephesians 5:9, Paul describes more “fruit” of the Christian life: “goodness, righteousness and truth.” The Holy Spirit also produces life and peace (Romans 8:6), hope (Romans 15:13) and spiritual wisdom (1 Corinthians 2:6-15). All Christians should have all these qualities.

As we yield to God's Spirit (Romans 8:13-14), and as we are led by the Spirit of Christ (verse 9), we will have Jesus Christ's mercy and compassion for others and his love for God's way of life.

“By their fruit you will recognize them,” said Jesus (Matthew 7:20). Many people will call Jesus “Lord,” and they will prophesy and perform miracles in his name (verses 21-22), but unless they do the will of the Father, they are false prophets (verses 21, 15). “By their fruit [by the way they live] you will recognize them” (verse 16). All Christians should have the fruit of God's Spirit.

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Questions & Answers

Question: Many people in our fellowship have visited other churches. Some have spoken in tongues. Are members allowed to speak in tongues?

Answer: Yes. Speaking in tongues is a New Testament practice, described as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Members may worship as the Spirit leads them. However, they should keep in mind that the Spirit does not lead to confusion, nor to division. Speaking in tongues should not be done in a situation in which others will be offended, frightened or made uncomfortable, such as in a regular worship service.

Spiritual gifts, including tongues, must always be used as God intends — to lead a person to growth in godly living, to edify the body of Christ, or to otherwise build the kingdom. As soon as a person focuses on the gift instead of the intended result of the gift, they are misusing it. Gifts are not for goosebumps or “good feelings.” They are given by God for a purpose — to edify the body and produce spiritual growth. They are not an end in themselves.

We are created to bring glory to God. Gifts are given to help us do that — never to bring glory or attention to ourselves. The more unusual gifts are not a sign that we are more spiritual than others. In some cases, they may even be given because we are dull of hearing, and God uses the gift as an extraordinary method of trying to get our attention. So, if a person has a particular gift, he or she should enjoy it, be thankful for it, and use it to edify — not to hurt or tear down or make others feel inferior.

Question: GCI does not allow tongues speaking in its worship services. Doesn't this contradict 1 Cor. 14:39, which says that we should not forbid tongues speaking?

Answer: We do not forbid tongues speaking. We forbid it only during worship services. Members are welcome to speak in tongues as a private prayer language or in small groups composed of people who know that tongues-speaking is allowed in that particular small group.

We believe in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, including miraculous gifts such as healing. But we do not believe that every Christian should have the same gift. We do not believe that all Christians ought to seek the gift of tongues. We welcome tongues-speakers into our fellowship, as long as they do not use their gift in a contentious or offensive way. Paul's message in 1 Cor. 14, summarized in verse 40, emphasizes order in the worship service, each activity at an appropriate time. In our tradition, we do not use the worship services for any of the miraculous gifts. There are other times when such gifts are more appropriate.

Question: Some Pentecostal churches have slaying in the Spirit, holy laughter, crying, moaning and barking. Haven't these practices (with the possible exception of tongues) been denounced by many evangelicals as unbiblical?

Response: Most charismatic churches believe in and practice the gift of tongues. However, they are not all alike. The degree of pentecostalism varies from congregation to congregation. Some Pentecostal pastors do not accept practices such as being slain in the Spirit, holy laughter, etc. Although these "manifestations" happen in some Pentecostal churches, their denominational headquarters do not also encourage or emphasize them. Simply because a minority of members in a denomination are teaching or practicing something, it doesn't mean that every church in that denomination is in favor of it.

We do not condemn the gift of tongues, but we do not allow it in our worship services. If a member has that gift, we would see it primarily as a

“prayer language.” We do not foresee any place in our worship services for manifestations such as holy laughter, barking or being slain in the Spirit.

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About the Authors

Michael Morrison received a PhD from Fuller Theological Seminary in 2006 and is Dean of Faculty and Instructor in New Testament for Grace Communion Seminary. He and his wife live in Southern California; their two children are adults. He is also associate pastor of a GCI church in Glendora. He is the author of several books, including:

Who Needs a New Covenant? The Rhetorical Function of the Covenant Motif in the Argument of Hebrews (print only)

Sabbath, Circumcision and Tithing: Which Old Testament Laws Apply to Christians?

E-books:

The Bible: A Guided Tour (co-author)

Discipleship 101: Basic Christian Teachings

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Inspiration, Authority, and Reliability of Scripture

The Proverbs 31 Woman and Other Biblical Women (co-author)

The Purpose for Human Life: Learning to Be Like Jesus Christ

Using Microsoft Word for Academic Papers

What Does the Bible Say About Prophecy and the Millennium?

What Does the Bible Say About Speaking in Tongues?

What Does the Bible Say About the Kingdom of God?

What Does the Bible Say About the Old and New Covenants?

What Does the Bible Say About the Sabbath?

What Does the Bible Say About Women in Church Leadership?

Joseph Tkach wrote chapters 9-11. He is pastor general and president of Grace Communion International. He received a bachelors degree from Ambassador College in 1973, a masters degree in Business Administration from Western International University in 1984, and a Doctor of Ministry degree from Azusa Pacific Seminary in 2000.

Chapter 12 is a corporate product.

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If you want to know more about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we offer help. First, we offer weekly worship services in hundreds of congregations worldwide. Perhaps you'd like to visit us. A typical worship service includes songs of praise, a message based on the Bible, and opportunity to meet people who have found Jesus Christ to be the answer to their spiritual quest. We try to be friendly, but without putting you on the spot. We do not expect visitors to give offerings—there's no obligation. You are a guest.

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Grace Communion International
3129 Whitehall Park Dr.
Charlotte, NC 28273-3335

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