

Sermon Title: The Gifts of the Spirit: Tongues & Interpretation

Yet, this remains one of the more controversial gifts in the Church today.

Definition: Tongues means LANGUAGE. “What is your native tongue?” Interpretation is simply that: the explanation of what the person speaking in tongues is saying to those who do not understand the language.

READ 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 (comment on diversity in the Body), 27-31 (rhetorical – A: “No”), 13:1-13 (sign of salvation & spirit fullness – LOVE), 14:1-28 (tongues are unintelligible but beneficial for the individual – or group w/interpretation), 36-40.

Interestingly enough, ALL of the objections and answers regarding the gift of tongues & interpretation are found in these passages.

A. Objections & Answers: Tongues & Interpretation

1. Tongues were a sign gift that ceased after the completion of Scripture or the death of the last Apostle.

1 Corinthians 13:8–10 (ESV) ⁸ Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. **1 Corinthians 13:12 (ESV)** ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

- They will cease when Jesus returns!

Hebrews 2:3–4 (ESV) ³ how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, ⁴ while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

Reductionist argument: Just because tongues were used as a sign used by God to affirm Jesus & the apostles' message, does not mean it is their only purpose. Paul states: “edifying oneself” and “edifying the church” are also purposes. Be wary of reductionist arguments.

Example of Reductionist Argument: John 10:27–28 (ESV) ²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

- **Context claim:** Jesus is talking about salvation, not teaching a broad theology about hearing God’s voice.
- **ANSWER:** People hear God’s voice at Salvation & through messages of wisdom, knowledge, & revelation (Acts 2, Rom 12, 1 Pet 4)

BE ON GUARD FOR REDUCTIONIST ARGUMENTS → Scripture interprets Scripture. Ask yourself, “What does the text SAY?” “What does the rest of the Bible say?” Be careful of people adding “always, never, only” to their interpretation of the text.

Answer: Tongues are a gift that will remain until Jesus returns, and it has many biblical uses beyond a sign of apostleship & authority.

2. What about abuses of the gifts? E.g. those that say tongues are the sign of the Spirit's fullness & thus, salvation, which is not true!

1 Corinthians 13:1 (ESV) ¹ *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*

- **Tongues are not the sign of Spirit fullness. Love for Jesus & people is the fruit of Spirit fullness.**

Further, this entire passage aims to correct this imbalance and abuse! The Church at Corinth used the gifts to elevate themselves over others and prove their spirituality; Paul expressly condemned these actions and corrected them.

1 Corinthians 12:29–30 (ESV) ²⁹ *Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?* ³⁰ *Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?*

- Paul states not all speak in tongues or interpret.

Answer: True, tongues are not the sign of the Spirit's fullness nor salvation. Genuine believers speak in tongues, and genuine believers do not speak in tongues. Love is the primary fruit of the Spirit's fullness.

3. The tongues that charismatics speak are just gibberish and aren't like the tongues in the Bible.

1 Corinthians 14:6–15 (ESV) *if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you ... If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played?... with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said?* ¹⁰ *There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning,* ¹¹ *but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker* ¹⁵ *What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also.*

- Paul was clear. If you do not understand the language, it sounds like gibberish, unintelligible. This does not make it unfruitful, just useless for teaching or edifying others.

Answer: Tongues, just like any language you do not know, sound unintelligible to those who do not understand the language. Paul states that does not mean they are meaningless; they are just meaningless to you.

4. Tongues are only human languages and not angelic ones!

1 Corinthians 13:1 (ESV) ¹ *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*

- Some claim this verse is rhetorical following the rhetoric of the passage before it (1 Cor 12) or that it is hyperbole, stating the verses that follow use exaggeration to make a point.
- **First**, one, both, or none of these claims may be true, and that would not have any bearing on whether tongues is for today, or how the Bible says we USE THE GIFT.
- **Secondly**, Jews of his time period believed in angelic speech; we know this from two non-biblical sources: "The Testament of Job" and "The Songs of the Sabbath". Paul would have been aware; this would have been a great time to CORRECT this if it were not true.

- **Thirdly**, to point #3, tongues are unintelligible to those who do not know the language; is it possible that we find out that ALL tongues that worshippers spoke in were some human language? Certainly possible! The argument that tongues are HUMAN language does NOT mean tongues should not be practiced.
- **Fourthly, the text says tongues of men and angels and legitimizes the possibility.**

1 Corinthians 14:39 (ESV) ³⁹ So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues.

Answer: Tongues could be both human and angelic languages. There are more than 7000 human languages, and no person has grasped more than 100 of them. No one with academic integrity can truly assert that the tongues someone is praying in are merely gibberish or a particular language unless they understand that language.

5. Tongues were a sign of judgment on the Jews

1 Corinthians 14:20–21 (ESV) ²⁰ *Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.* ²¹ *In the Law it is written, “By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.”*

- Yes, this verse in Isaiah talks about people of foreign languages judging disobedient Israel.
- **Again. Reductionist argument.**
- Paul immediately connects this with ALL unbelievers in the verses that follow and says tongues can be a sign to them!

Answer: EVEN IF this verse meant judgment for the Jews, it does not negate the MANY other passages that speak about the purposes of tongues.

6. The only purpose of tongues was evangelism. Thus, they are no longer needed.

Acts 2:4–7 (ESV) ⁴ *And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.* ⁵ *Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven.* ⁶ *And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language.*

- Here, they spoke in tongues, and it WAS human languages and that opened doors for evangelism!

Again. Reductionist argument! ACTS demonstrates tongues were NOT merely evangelistic!

Acts 10:44–46 (ESV) ⁴⁴ *While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.* ⁴⁵ *And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles.* ⁴⁶ *For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God...*

- Everyone there spoke the SAME language. And everyone was ALREADY saved.

Acts 19:5–7 (ESV) ⁵ *On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.* ⁶ *And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying.* ⁷ *There were about twelve men in all.*

- AFTER they were saved. Paul laid his hands on them, and they spoke in tongues! Again, all spoke the same language, and all were believers.

Answer: Yes, evangelism is a biblical use of the gift of tongues, alongside many other uses.

B. The Purposes for the Gift of Tongues & Interpretation

1. To worship & glorify Jesus!

1 Corinthians 12:3 (ESV) ³ ... and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit.

1 Corinthians 14:15–16 (ESV) *I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also.* ¹⁶ *Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say "Amen" to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying?*

- We run out of ways to worship Jesus and align our hearts to His! Tongues are a precious GIFT that bypass our human minds and engage our spirit in worshipping JESUS.
- Perhaps you feel dry, disconnected, distant from God – we enter His courts with PRAISE!
- This is a primary PURPOSE of TONGUES! TO WORSHIP JESUS!

2. To edify (build up) ourselves

1 Corinthians 14:4–5 (ESV) ⁴ *The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.* ⁵ *Now I want you all to speak in tongues, ... (no doubt!)*

- **Question:** Do any of you need to be built up? Anxious? Stuck? Discouraged? Disconnected from God and others? Tired? – you need to be BUILT UP – tongues are expressly given for this purpose!

Jude 17–23 (ESV) *They (apostles) said to you, "In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions."* ¹⁹ *It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit.* ²⁰ *But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit,* ²¹ *keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.*

- Building ourselves up – praying in the Spirit!

1 Corinthians 14:18 (ESV) ¹⁸ *I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.*

- MAKES SENSE why Paul's personal prayer life included much prayer in tongues!

Jackie Pullinger: Chasing the Dragon: In *Chasing the Dragon*, Jackie Pullinger's experience with praying in tongues became the catalyst for a miraculous ministry among Hong Kong's most dangerous criminals. Pullinger was a 22-year-old British music student who felt called by God to hop on a boat to Asia with no agency backing and only \$10 in her pocket. She landed in the Kowloon Walled City—a densely packed, lawless six-acre enclave that neither the British nor Chinese governments controlled. It was a dark maze of ungoverned high-rises dominated by rival Triad gangs, human trafficking, open brothels, and widespread heroin addiction.

Arriving alone in 1966, Pullinger initially saw very little fruit. Frustrated by her lack of impact, an older missionary challenged her to pray in tongues for at least 15 minutes every day. Though she felt nothing

emotional at first, she faithfully obeyed. Within six weeks, her internal fear dissolved, replaced by supernatural boldness. She began stepping directly into heroin dens and gang hideouts, where hardened triad bosses unexpectedly surrendered their lives to Christ.

The most dramatic manifestation came during drug detox. Heroin withdrawal is notoriously brutal—marked by violent vomiting, severe muscle cramps, and agonizing pain. Pullinger instructed young, recovering gang members to pray in tongues continuously whenever the pain or cravings flared up.

Remarkably, as these young men prayed in the Spirit, their physical agony vanished. Thousands of addicts underwent complete, painless "cold turkey" detox right on the floor of her small youth center. Praying in tongues transformed from an obscure theological concept into a daily, practical lifeline that broke lifelong addictions and built the foundation for her life-saving work through the St. Stephen's Society.

Was Jackie built up? YES!! Were the addicts built up and delivered? YES!! (Jackie believed it was the tongues of angels – they never had an interpreter)

Story: Example: When I first received the gift of tongues

We had been praying for some time for the gift of tongues, and I had not received it. Then, during one of our leadership cells, I received it. I can hardly explain it. Another language seemed to flow from my mouth as I surrendered to the Spirit. Later on that evening, my wife came home from her leadership cell and had an intense headache and wanted things quiet and dark. I went to her to pray for her. As I knelt before her, I laid my hands on her stomach and began to pray with my new spiritual language. After a few moments, she exclaimed, "As you started praying, the pain in my head turned to a warm sensation that left my head and travelled to my stomach where your hands were and disappeared."

Lou and I were BOTH built up!

3. To Edify (build up) the Church (others)

1 Corinthians 14:5 (ESV) ⁵ *Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.* **Private Prayer vs. Public Proclamation**

- Interpretation of tongues is needed for building up the Church – why? Imagine if I was speaking this sermon in a foreign language. No one would know it! Unless you could INTERPRET.

This is Paul's point. It isn't that praying in tongues with a small group is bad, or that praying over someone else is wrong. CONTEXT MATTERS. Here, the context is visitors in the church, unbelievers, and/or speaking in tongues to TEACH others. (Jackie Pullinger story fits more under personal edification)

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C. Practice: Praying for the Gift of Tongues

1. Confess unbelief and any repulsion towards God's gifts.
2. Ask Him for the gift of tongues & interpretation!
3. Wait on Him. He is a good gift-giver!
4. Keep on Seeking, Asking, Knocking!