

There are enthusiastic supporters of “tongues” as a spiritual gift who talk as if every believer should experience it. Our response must be based upon a correct knowledge of Scripture. Without even asking if the gift “tongues” is valid for today, we can find clear guidelines from the NT when speaking in “tongues” was a valid spiritual gift.

I. Introduction

1. *A definition of “tongues”*: “Tongues”, in the broadest usage, are utterances which are generally unintelligible to the speaker and unintelligible to most if not all of the audience. They appear to be expressed without conscious control by the person speaking, although whether the person speaks or not at a certain moment may or may not be under that person’s control.
2. *An historical thumbnail sketch*: “Tongues” began as a real spiritual gift in the early church. Within Christianity it was practically non-existent except for a few heretical sects from the 2nd century until around 1900 when the modern tongues movement began.

II. The essential consistency, nature and content of “tongues” in the NT

1. *Wherever “tongues” are mentioned in the NT, it is referring to the same thing.* The same terminology is used for the phenomena in every passage (Mark 16:17; Acts 2; 10:46; 19:6; 1 Cor 12-14). The human authors, Mark, Luke and Paul, all worked together at various times and would not have knowingly chosen the same terminology to describe essentially different phenomena. Historical associations with Peter also argue for common knowledge and hence clear terminology. Objections are generally based upon unwarranted assumptions, e.g., as to the purpose or nature of tongues or that differing events meant differing phenomena.
2. *NT “tongues” contained unlearned, human language though unintelligible to the speaker.* If all the occasions of speaking in tongues refers to the same phenomena, then according to Acts 2:4, 6, & 8 NT “tongues” contained unlearned, human language (and usually unintelligible to the speaker). The objection from 1 Cor 13:1 that “tongues” were angelic languages neglects to account for the exaggeration in 13:1-3 and fails to see how the verse actually reinforces the view that “tongues” refer to an intelligible language. In 14:2 “not speaking to men” is limited by the context to “tongues” without interpretation and can naturally be extended from divinely gifted interpretation to naturally attained interpretation. The speaker is talking to man, for no one there had the gift of interpretation or otherwise understood.
3. *The content of “tongues”, as far as the NT clearly reports on it, limits it to praise, thanksgiving, or declarations of the wonders of God.* See Acts 2:11; possibly Acts 10:46; and 1 Cor 14:16. The mysteries of 1 Cor 14:2 probably are descriptive, i.e., that which is “hidden .. not obvious to the understanding”. Other suggestions for other content have no basis in Scripture. On Pentecost it was not the gospel. Peter subsequently preached that. It is not the petition of the Spirit “in groans which words cannot express” (Rom 8:26), since utterances do not utter the unutterable. It was not teaching, etc., which could edify, but contrasted to that (1 Cor 14:5-6).

III. Tongues was classified as a “lesser” gift.

1. *It is considered a lesser gift, because it does not edify.* See 1 Cor 14 and especially verses 5, 19, 28. “Tongues” without interpretation do not edify and it is wrong to speak in tongues among other Christians without interpretation.
2. *Its public use without interpretation and even its private use, is contrary to the selfless purpose of all spiritual gifting.* See 1 Cor 12:7, 25, 31; 14:12, 26. To speak in “tongues” publicly without interpretation is contrary to the purpose of any gift since no one is edified. In 14:4, “he edifies himself”, must also from the context be understood in a negative sense, like inflating or emboldening oneself. (Cf. 8:10.)
3. *Over-emphasis on speaking in “tongues” is childish and can even be unintentionally malicious (14:20).*

Do not be disturbed by any who would come to you insisting that you really need to speak in tongues to have a really spiritual life since even in NT times this was not the case.

IV. To speak in “tongues” was given a very low priority in the NT.

1. *Believers were not told to seek it, but to desire greater gifts which do edify the body.* There is no command in the NT to seek the gift of “tongues”. The command to desire greater gifts puts “tongues” at an even lower priority. God’s priority is that the Body of Christ be built up.
2. *Compared to love, any of the gifts were secondary.* None of the gifts in 1 Cor 13:1-3, even in exaggerated fulfilment, were personally beneficial without love. If greater gifts without love were nothing, how much less is a lesser gift without love.

The priority which a believer should set in not “tongues”? Neither is it the area into which we should be putting out our efforts. Instead “pursue love” and seek to build up others spiritually (14:1).

In the context of the NT church there were some and only some with a valid, Spirit-given gift of “tongues.” The others were not missing out and were not told to seek that gift. An overemphasis is at best childish and at worse serves evil purposes. Instead pursue love and desire to edify. Those work towards maturity in all.