The Gift of Tongues
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
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The Gift of Tongues was a divinely bestowed supernatural ability to speak in a human language that had not been learned by the one speaking. According to the Apostle Paul, when believers exercised the gift of tongues in church, they were to speak one at a time, and only two or three were to speak in a given service (1 Cor. 14:27). Furthermore, when tongues were spoken in the church, they were to be interpreted by someone with the gift of interpretation so that the others might be edified by the God-given message (1 Cor. 14:5, 13, 27). In this way, tongues did not serve as a private prayer language, but rather—like all spiritual gifts—as a means by which one might serve and edify the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:7; 1 Pet. 4:10).

Tongues “Will Cease”

In 1 Corinthians 13:8 Paul made an interesting, almost startling, statement: “Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away.” In the expression “love never fails,” the Greek word translated “fails” means “to decay” or “to be abolished.” Paul was not saying that love is invincible or that it cannot be rejected. He was saying that love is eternal—that it will be applicable forever and will never be passé. Tongues, however, “will cease.” The Greek verb used in 1 Corinthians 13:8 means “to cease permanently,” and implies that when tongues ceased, they would never start up again.

Here is the question that this passage poses for the contemporary charismatic movement: if tongues were supposed to cease, has that already happened, or is it yet future? Charismatic believers insist that none of the gifts have ceased yet, so the cessation of tongues is yet future. Most non-charismatics insist that tongues have already ceased, passing away with the apostolic age. Who is right?

It should be noted that 1 Corinthians 13:8 itself does not say when tongues were to cease. Although 1 Corinthians 13:9-10 teaches that prophecy and knowledge will cease when the “perfect” (i.e., the eternal state) comes, the language of the passage—particularly the middle voice of the Greek verb translated “will cease”—puts tongues in a category apart from these gifts. Paul writes that while prophecy and knowledge will be “done away” (passive voice) by “the perfect,” the gift of tongues “will

cease” in and of itself (middle voice) prior to the time that “the perfect” arrives. When did this cessation of tongues take place? The evidence of Scripture and history indicate that tongues ceased in the apostolic age.

Evidence from Scripture

What biblical or theological evidence is there that tongues have ceased? First, the gift of tongues was a miraculous, revelatory gift, and the age of miracles and revelation ended with the apostles. The last recorded miracles in the New Testament occurred around A.D. 58, with the healings on the island of Malta (Acts 28:7-10). From A.D. 58 to 96, when John finished the book of Revelation, no miracle is recorded. Miracle gifts like tongues and healing are mentioned only in 1 Corinthians, an early epistle. Two later epistles, Ephesians and Romans, both discuss gifts of the Spirit at length—but no mention is made of the miraculous gifts. By that time miracles were already looked on as something in the past (Heb. 2:3-4). Apostolic authority and the apostolic message needed no further confirmation. Before the first century ended, the entire New Testament had been written and was circulating through the churches.

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The revelatory gifts had ceased to serve any purpose. And when the apostolic age ended with the death of the Apostle John, the signs that identified the apostles had already become moot (cf. 2 Cor. 12:12).

Second, tongues were intended as a sign to unbelieving Israel (1 Cor. 14:21-22; cf. Is. 28:11-12). They signified that God had begun a new work that encompassed the Gentiles. The Lord would now speak to all nations in all languages. The barriers were down. And so the gift of languages symbolized not only the curse of God on a disobedient nation, but also the blessing of God on the whole world.

Tongues were therefore a sign of transition between the Old and New Covenants. With the establishment of the church, a new day had dawned for the people of God. God would speak in all languages. But once the period of transition was past, the sign was no longer necessary.

Third, the gift of tongues was inferior to other gifts. It was given primarily as a sign (1 Cor. 14:22) and was also easily misused to edify self (1 Cor. 14:4). The church meets for the edification of the body, not self-gratification or personal experience-seeking. Therefore, tongues had limited usefulness in the church, and so it was never intended to be a permanent gift.

The Evidence from History

The evidence of history also indicates that tongues have ceased. It is significant that tongues are mentioned only in the earliest books of the New Testament. Paul wrote at least twelve epistles after 1 Corinthians and never mentioned tongues again. Peter never mentioned tongues; James never mentioned tongues; John never mentioned tongues; neither did Jude. Tongues appeared only briefly in Acts and 1 Corinthians as the new message of the gospel was being spread. But once the church was established, tongues were gone. They stopped. The later books of the New Testament do not mention tongues again, and neither did anyone in the post-apostolic age.

Chrysostom and Augustine—the greatest theologians of the eastern and western churches—considered tongues obsolete. Writing in the fourth century, Chrysostom stated categorically that tongues had ceased by his time and described the gift as an obscure practice. Augustine referred to tongues as a sign that was adapted to the apostolic age. In fact, during the first five hundred years of the church, the only people who claimed to have spoken in tongues were followers of Montanus, who was branded as a heretic.

The next time any significant tongues-speaking movement arose within Christianity was in the late seventeenth century. A group of militant Protestants in the Cevennes region of southern France began to prophecy, experience visions, and speak in tongues. The group, sometimes called the Cevennol prophets, is remembered for its political and military activities, not its spiritual legacy. Most of their prophecies went unfulfilled. They were rabidly anti-Roman Catholic, and advocated the use of armed force against the Roman Catholic church. Many of them were consequently persecuted and killed by Rome.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Jansenists, a group of Roman Catholic loyalists who opposed the Reformers' teaching on justification by faith, also claimed to be able to speak in tongues in the 1700s.

Another group that practiced a form of tongues was the Shakers, an American sect with Quaker roots that flourished in the mid-1700s. Mother Ann Lee, founder of the sect, regarded herself as the female equivalent of Jesus Christ. She claimed to be able to speak in seventy-two languages. The Shakers believed sexual intercourse was sinful, even within marriage. They spoke in tongues while dancing

and singing in a trancelike state.

Then in the early nineteenth century, Scottish Presbyterian pastor Edward Irving and members of his congregation practiced speaking in tongues and prophesying. Irvingite prophets often contradicted each other, their prophecies failed to come to pass, and their meetings were characterized by wild excesses. The movement was further discredited when some of their prophets admitted to falsifying prophecies and others even attributed their “giftedness” to evil spirits. This group eventually became the Catholic Apostolic Church, which taught many false doctrines, embracing several Roman Catholic doctrines and creating twelve apostolic offices.

All of those supposed manifestations of tongues were identified with groups that were heretical, fanatical, or otherwise unorthodox. The judgment of biblically orthodox believers who were their contemporaries was that all those groups were aberrations. Surely that should also be the assessment of any Christian who is concerned with truth. Thus, we conclude that from the end of the apostolic era to the beginning of the twentieth century there were no genuine occurrences of the New Testament gift of tongues. They had ceased, as the Holy Spirit said they would (1 Cor. 13:8). The gift of tongues is not for today.

Adapted from John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992). For a fuller treatment of the gift of tongues, consult this resource.

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