

What is the “Gift of Tongues?”

“Straight Talk about the Gift of Tongues”

The gift of tongues may strike you as something exotic, ecstatic and utterly mysterious. Yet millions of modern Christians could tell you about their own personal experience of it.

Just what is the gift of tongues? What is its purpose anyway? Didn't it occur once and for all when the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles?

Bring up the charism of tongues, and questions fly thick and fast. The first and best place to look for answers is in God's Word. Luckily, we can hardly classify tongues as a rare topic in the Scriptures, since there are at least 23 verses that indisputably mention it. Moreover, another dozen names, such as “praying in the Spirit” (cf. Rom. 8:26-27; Eph. 6:18; Jude 20).

By carefully studying these passages, we can learn much about this gift of the Spirit. One conclusion stands out clearly: there exist at least three different dimensions of the gift of tongues.

1. TONGUES AS A SIGN OF THE SPIRIT'S COMING

In its Pentecost account, the Acts of the Apostles describes the first of these: “All were filled with the Holy Spirit. They began to express themselves in foreign tongues and make bold proclamation as the Spirit prompted them” (Act 2:4). The people in the crowd were puzzled; “because each one heard these men speaking in his/her own language” (Act 2:6). Here we see the Holy Spirit empowering the apostles to speak intelligible languages they had never learned. It was a miracle designed to alert the chosen people to the stupendous arrival of the Paraclete and to make them eager to listen to St. Peter's explanation. It was also a symbol of the worldwide destiny of the Gospel and the brotherhood of all races and nations in Jesus.

2. TONGUES AS A FORM OF PRAYER OR DEVOTION

Tonguespeaking can also be a prayer of devotion: “A man who speaks in a tongue is talking not to men but to God. No one understands him because he utters mysteries in the Spirit” (1 Cor. 14:2). “Talking to God” defines prayer pretty accurately. Notice that in this case the language does not appear to be an intelligible one. St. Paul tells us some of the characteristics of this type of prayer. Even though the one praying does not understand the words he utters (1 Cor 14:2, 13), nevertheless this activity does him good (1 Cor. 14:4). It is a kind of prayer that leaves the intellect in neutral, so to speak (1 Cor 14:14), allowing for the deeper levels of the human spirit to express praise to God by the Holy Spirit and a yearning for His presence. Since it is true prayer that strengthens the individual, St. Paul is thankful that he speaks in tongues, and he wants everyone to have the gift (1 Cor. 14:5, 18, 39). He carefully warns, however, that it confers no badge of privilege. It has value only in relation to love, without which the tongues of men and angels are mere clanging cymbals (1 Cor 13:1).

3. TONGUES AS A FORM OF PROPHECY

The third dimension to the gift of tongues remains to be explored. Again, St. Paul indicates that the Holy Spirit may use the gift of tongues as a vehicle for delivering a message to a congregation of believers. Since this form of tongues is normally undecipherable, however, he insists that this is permissible only when someone in the congregation “interprets,” (that is, is inspired by the Holy Spirit with the meaning of the tonguespeaker’s message). “If any are going to talk in tongues let it be at most two or three, each in turn, with another to interpret what they are saying. But! If there is no one to interpret, there should be silence in the assembly, each one speaking only to himself and to God” (1 Cor. 14:27-28). So it is plain from the New Testament that the charism of tongues is a multipurpose instrument utilized by the Holy Spirit to communicate with men and to enable believers to find a new level of communication with God. Nowhere in the New Testament does it even hint that this manifestation of the Holy Spirit was intended only for the first years of the church’s existence. Nevertheless, this gift, which was common in the days of the apostles, seems bafflingly to have dwindled within the next couple of centuries.

Tongues, however, didn’t entirely die out in the Church. From time to time the phenomenon reemerged in individual lives of the Saints or groups of believers, only to vanish again. That is, until 1967. In that year was born the Charismatic Movement in the Catholic Church which was termed Catholic Pentecostalism. At a retreat weekend some students from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh experienced a profound conversion and new power and presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. As they studied the Acts of the Apostles they perceived the close link between the coming of the Holy Spirit in power and speaking in tongues. With expectant faith, they prayed for the gift.

Their prayers were answered. Not only did many receive tongues, but also they discovered that this gift was a door way into the Charismatic Realm that included many other works of the Holy Spirit, such as prophecy, healing and miracles.

PRESENTDAY EXPERIENCE

Drawing upon the existence of the Charismatic Movement over the past 39 years, let’s round out our information on the gift of tongues.

Even today there are reports from reliable witnesses of people speaking in Greek or Norwegian or some language they had never heard or studied. But, as in the Bible, these seem to be rare occurrences. Due to the immense number of languages (over 3000 in all) and the impossibility of having scientifically controlled conditions for one of these unforeseeable happenings, we cannot claim that they are “laboratory proven.”

Praying in tongues is by far the most common manifestation of the Holy Spirit. The first time a person does it, he/she may feel exhilarated and drenched in the peaceful joy of conscious union with God. As he/she becomes more use to the gift, the emotional intensity normally decreases. He/She can pray in tongues as easily as he/she prays in his/her native language. He/She can stop when he/she wills to. He/She is under no compulsion and is not in a trance.

For many Christians, praying in tongues opens up a whole new sphere of communications with God. If their prayers previously consisted almost exclusively of petitions, it may be their introduction to true praise, the wondrous overflow of a heart dipped into infinite Goodness.

Man is more than his intellect. His entire being needs to voice itself to God. Praying in tongues, many have discovered, achieves something which praying in their own languages did not do. It is the prayer of the subconscious, expressing the inexpressible, enabling our whole being to reach beyond itself, to escape from its limitations into the vastness of God's love. Christians who have received this gift testify that it helps them when their own words seem inadequate, or when they don't know exactly what to pray for (cf. Rom. 8:26), when their mind is in turmoil or their will tempted, when they are depressed, anxious or weary.

MANY BENEFITS

Basically, then, the gift of tongues enlarges and enriches the individuals prayer life. It gives them a cherished experience of the Holy Spirit working in and through them. This, in turn, encourages them to pray and strengthens the hope that they will be heard. Through prayer they become more aware of Jesus as their Lord and Master and more inclined to follow the Gospel and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Millions of Christians today use the gift of tongues regularly in their private prayer.

Like St. Paul, they normally alternate it with more traditional forms of prayer that engage the mind (cf. 1 Cor. 14:15). They also pray in tongues during prayer meetings and (if the congregation approves of the practice) during church services like a (Charismatic Mass). In such gatherings, also the third or prophetically dimension of tongues frequently comes into play. Someone who believes that the Holy Spirit is urging him/her will speak aloud for several seconds in tongues. A hush descends upon the group as they then pray and wait for the interpretation, which usually follows within a few minutes.

Such messages are considered to be from God only after the community exercises discernment or spiritual judgment on them. In any case, they are strictly subordinated to the inspired Scriptures, with which they must always agree. They do not bring new revelations not found in the Bible but are more in the line of words of correction, consolation, encouragement and exhortation for the group.

IS IT FOR EVERYBODY?

Does God want to give every Christian the gift of tongues? St. Paul wrote, "I should like it if all of you spoke in tongues..." (1 Cor 14:5). On the other hand, he implies a negative response to his question, "Do all speak in tongues..."(1 Cor. 12:30)

Personally, I don't believe we can determine this point with certainty. I do know this: the gift of tongues is the most common of the charisms among the Charismatic Movement. The vast majority of those who seek tongues receive tongues. It is a rather rare exception of those who do not.

It is vital to realize, though, that it would be an aberration to ask God for gift of tongues merely out of curiosity or for the sake of a novel thrill. Nor should we isolate tongues from the rest of the Christian life or exaggerate its function and importance.

Our intention, like that of the disciples in the upper room should always be God's will, God's kingdom in us a more complete yielding to the Holy Spirit who reforms us in the image of Jesus so that we can be pleasing to the Father and glorify him among men. Seeking the gift of tongues has profound meaning when it is an expression of our desire to turn over our words (symbols of our thoughts, our hearts) to the Spirit of Jesus.

God has bigger plans for us than we can imagine. The experience of praying in tongues is intimately connected with a much wider experience of God's presence and love and power (called the baptism in the Holy Spirit or release of the Holy Spirit). It is consequently not an ending but a beginning, the opening of a door, an invitation to the Spirit to penetrate our being more deeply, a pledge to listen to Him more attentively and to live the Gospel more intensely.

RECEIVING THE GIFT OF TONGUES

The gift of tongues and the baptism in the Holy Spirit are not experiences to rush into. Neither should we desire them purely on our own initiative. The decision should be our response to the Holy Spirit's light and guidance.

It should be wise, as a preparation, first to ponder the Scriptures on the promises and plan of God, especially the role of the Paraclete and His charismatic gifts. Accentuate the reading with prayer and periods of meditative listening, to allow the Spirit the chance to reveal His will.

When you are sure that you understand sufficiently what is involved (nobody ever understands completely) and that God is leading you in this direction, then pray for the Holy Spirit to manifest Himself within you in a new way.

Let your prayer be free from any anxiety and brimming with expectant confidence. God comes to us precisely because we are unworthy and need Him. Remember His promise: "If you, with all your sins know how to give your children good things, how much more will the heavenly Father give the holy Spirit to those who ask him" (Luke 11:13).

Many people have found it helpful to have others pray with them ("... if two of you join your voices on earth to pray for anything whatever, it shall be granted to you..." Matt. 18:19). In any case, it would be good to affiliate with a prayer group or community where the charismatic dimension of the Christian life is appreciated and sound teaching is available.

Speaking in tongues is a joint effort between you and the Holy Spirit. He will supply the new language but He will not force you to speak. When you open your thoughts and you hear words in your mind or feel an impulse to speak in your throat or lips, give voice to whatever is there. Don't be afraid to look foolish; anyone trying a new language for the first time feels a little embarrassment. Usually it is necessary that you put your vocal apparatus into gear, not by speaking your native language, but merely by making sounds. Believe that

the Holy Spirit will form them into the gifts of tongues (because you requested Him to), and He will. Don't analyze. Concentrate on God and express your worship of Him by means of the sounds you are making.

Once you have received the gift of tongues, use it daily in your prayer life and experiment to discover how the gift can aid you to praise and love the Father and to reinforce your loyalty to Jesus Christ and His Gospel.

“But you, beloved, grow strong in your holy faith through prayer in the Holy Spirit. Persevere in God's love, and welcome the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ which leads to life eternal.” (Jude 20, 21)

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