

# The Biblical View of Tongues

## 1 Corinthians 12-14

Andrew R. Rappaport

---

### Introduction

There is much confusion in some Christian circles about a particular gift of the Holy Spirit: speaking in tongues. The gift of speaking in tongues is the miraculous ability to speak a known human language that the speaker did not previously know. Some assert that the language of this gift is non-human. We will address where that view originated and why it is not true. In fact, Acts 2:5-13, which is the first occurrence of tongues in the New Testament, clearly explains that the tongues were human languages. The languages are actually listed in verses 8-11:

**And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God.**

Generally, modern tongues speaking is found in the emotionalism of the Charismatic movement. The current movement sees tongues as a most important gift with such a great priority that everyone should seek after it and that all should strive for it. They also teach that it is a gift from God to edify one's self.

To learn about a biblical view of tongues and their uses, we need to look in the Bible, not ourselves. Acts 2 is not instruction on tongues but only the details of an event involving tongues. The clearest and only teaching on the issue of tongues is Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 12-14. Much of the current tongues speaking movement is rooted in a misunderstanding of these chapters. A careful evaluation of these chapters reveals that neither Paul nor God would endorse the current movement. Paul will express that 1) there should be a diversity of gifts, 2) the priority of gifts is not tongues as related to its importance, and 3) the purpose of gifts are for the edification of the church, not one's own self.

### I. Diversity of Gifts (vs. 12:1-31)

**<sup>1</sup>Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant:**

**<sup>2</sup>You know that you were Gentiles, carried away to these dumb idols, however you were led. <sup>3</sup>Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.**

**<sup>4</sup>There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. <sup>5</sup>There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. <sup>6</sup>And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. <sup>7</sup>But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: <sup>8</sup>for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same**

Spirit, <sup>9</sup>to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, <sup>10</sup>to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. <sup>11</sup>But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.

<sup>12</sup>For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. <sup>13</sup>For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body— whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. <sup>14</sup>For in fact the body is not one member but many.

<sup>15</sup>If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? <sup>16</sup>And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? <sup>17</sup>If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? <sup>18</sup>But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. <sup>19</sup>And if they were all one member, where would the body be?

<sup>20</sup>But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. <sup>21</sup>And the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”; nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” <sup>22</sup>No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. <sup>23</sup>And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, <sup>24</sup>but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, <sup>25</sup>that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. <sup>26</sup>And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

<sup>27</sup>Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. <sup>28</sup>And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. <sup>29</sup>Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? <sup>30</sup>Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? <sup>31</sup>But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way. (1 Corinthians 12:1-31).

In the current charismatic movement, tongues are almost a necessity for every believer as a sign of spiritual maturity called a “second blessing.” Some believe it is even a sign of salvation. There is great emphasis on encouraging **all** believers to strive for the speaking of tongues. The Corinthians had the same problem. They were all seeking to claim to speak in tongues, heal people, and do miracles, but the greatest emphasis was on tongues, and that is why Paul had to address the issue with the Corinthians. However, Paul goes to great lengths to prove that tongues is a lesser gift to be seeking and that not all believers—or even most believers— would have this gift. The gift seeking itself is wrong; God commands believers to pursue love, not gifts (14:1). God gives spiritual gifts at the point of salvation, and then we may discover them, not seek after them.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul makes the point that not **all** believers have the same gifts. Paul lists many gifts and explains the diversity of gifts. Paul uses the example of the church as the body of Christ. In this example, Paul points out that each member of the body **must** have a **different** function. The reason for a diversity of gifts is diversity in function. A body needs different members to have different functions, or else the whole body will not function properly. Therefore, if **all** members sought the same gift, then they would seek the same function, and as Paul says, “*if the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing?*” (v. 17). The body should have a diversity of gifts and not the same.

Paul spends time in verses 14-26 explaining that believers need to be content with the giftedness that they have and **not** to be seeking gifts that they do not have. Each member of the body must be content with their own gifts so that the diversity of gifts within the body will function properly. No one in the body should be critical of another’s giftedness because all are necessary. Moreover, no one should expect that everyone should have the same gift. If God gives spiritual gifts to a member of the body, it is because He knows that it is necessary for the functioning of the body.

However, the current Charismatic movement places pressure on most, if not all, believers to have one specific gift: speaking in tongues. In truth, the Charismatic movement is wrong even to encourage anyone to try to speak in tongues. Either God gives the gift at salvation, or He does not, but no one should be seeking the “gift.”

Further, we see that Paul does not place a priority on tongues as the Charismatic movement does. Paul states that God has appointed certain gifts in an order: 1) apostles (sent ones), 2) prophets (preachers), and 3) teachers. He states after these three (all of which involve speaking in the common language) come other gifts: miracles, healings, helps, administration, and lastly tongues. If tongues were something so important that **all** believers should strive for, then why is it mentioned last? This does not appear to be a priority. Paul clearly states that apostles, prophets and teachers are a priority.

## **II. Priority of Gifts (vs. 13:1-14:1)**

**<sup>1</sup>Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup>And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.**

**<sup>4</sup>Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; <sup>5</sup>does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; <sup>6</sup>does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; <sup>7</sup>bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.**

**<sup>8</sup>Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. <sup>9</sup>For we know in part and we prophesy in part. <sup>10</sup>But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.**

**<sup>11</sup>When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. <sup>12</sup>For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.**

**<sup>13</sup>And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. <sup>1</sup>Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. (1 Corinthians 13:1-14:1).**

Readers generally focus on the description of love in this chapter, but they often forget that the context of it is a comparison between love and tongues. .

As we saw in chapter 12, Paul has just made a case for a diversity of gifts, and no one should seek after a spiritual gift. He now compares the Corinthians' error of priority for tongues speaking to what every Christian should be seeking after: love.

Love is eternal; tongues are temporal, showing the importance and priority of love over tongues. Paul corrects the Corinthians with this comparison because their use of "gift of tongues" as a means to prove spirituality was actually spiritual pride. They were **not** showing love.

However, for many in the Charismatic movement today share in the Corinthian problem. Since Charismatics say that because tongues speaking is the sign of the "second blessing," it is therefore also a test of one's spirituality. In other words, if a person does not speak in tongues, he is neither being indwelt with the Holy Spirit nor mature in the faith. However, according to Paul, the test of spirituality is love (something all believers should have), not tongues (something that only some believers should have).

Paul employs hyperbolic statements to contrast love and tongues. He states that **if** there was a language of angels, and he spoke it but did not have love, then he is nothing but a noise maker (v. 1). Many in the Charismatic movement use verse 1 to prove that they can speak some angelic language not known to man.

However, if Paul is taken literally in verse 1, should he not also be taken literally in verse 2? When Paul claims to "*understand all mysteries*" and have "*all knowledge*," do we as readers liken him to God, having the attribute of omniscience (something only God can have)? Of course, not! It is clear that Paul is not claiming to be God, but using hyperbole to make the clearest contrast possible. Paul exaggerates to emphasize the point so that the reader would see that love is greater than tongues and that faith is greater than prophecy.

Verse 1 is also commonly used to insist that the language of tongues speaking is an angelic language not known to man. , This argument is refuted by Paul's statement in 14:10 when he speaks of tongues in reference to a "*language in the world*".

After this description of love, Paul returns to the discussion of spiritual gifts.

Paul states that tongues will cease but that love is eternal and will never cease. The debate about the cessation of tongue speaking usually revolves around a phrase in verse 10: "*that which is perfect*". The word for "*perfect*" can mean "complete" or "mature" as well as "perfect," However, the three illustrations which Paul uses—"understand as a child," "seeing in a mirror dimly," and "knowing in part"—all refer to something that is immature or incomplete compared to something that is matured or completed. Since, the word for "*perfect*" can mean complete or

mature as well as “perfect”, it is better interpreted as something completed or matured, not something that is in a state of perfection. Therefore, this cannot be a reference to Christ because He is perfect and by no means immature or incomplete.. It makes more sense to interpret the “*perfect*” thing that causes tongues to cease to be either the church or the completion of the Canon (the Bible). Furthermore, the latter is the better interpretation because the gifts that cease— prophecies, tongues, and knowledge— are all revelatory gifts. After the completion of the Canon, there is no more need for these other gifts.

Not only would tongues cease when the Canon was completed, but Paul reiterates that faith, hope, and love are the greatest of gifts and that love is the greatest of these three (v.13). Paul then commands us to “*pursue love*” (14:1). Contrary to the Charismatic pursuit to speak in tongues, God commands us to seek love. The contrast is clear. Love is the priority and should be pursued, not tongues. It is wrong to encourage the pursuit of tongues speaking.

Paul clearly believes that love is the priority of the Christian. The problem in the Corinthian church was that they were proudly and selfishly using tongues to prove themselves more spiritual than one another. The current Charismatic church often does the same, even redefining selfishness as self-edification. They state that the speaking of tongues is often in some unknown language for the purpose of self-edification. Paul would say that to love is greater. Love is the priority and not tongues. Now he addresses the purpose of spiritual gifts.

### **III. Purpose of Gifts (vs. 14:2-40)**

**<sup>2</sup>For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries. <sup>3</sup>But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. <sup>4</sup>He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. <sup>5</sup>I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification.**

**<sup>6</sup>But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching? <sup>7</sup>Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played? <sup>8</sup>For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle? <sup>9</sup>So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. <sup>10</sup>There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them is without significance. <sup>11</sup>Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks will be a foreigner to me. <sup>12</sup>Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel.**

**<sup>13</sup>Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. <sup>14</sup>For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. <sup>15</sup>What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will**

also sing with the understanding. <sup>16</sup>Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say “Amen” at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say? <sup>17</sup>For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified.

<sup>18</sup>I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; <sup>19</sup>yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

<sup>20</sup>Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature.

<sup>21</sup>In the law it is written: “With men of other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people; And yet, for all that, they will not hear Me,” says the Lord.

<sup>22</sup>Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe. <sup>23</sup>Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind? <sup>24</sup>But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. <sup>25</sup>And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you.

<sup>26</sup>How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. <sup>27</sup>If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one interpret. <sup>28</sup>But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God. <sup>29</sup>Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. <sup>30</sup>But if anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent. <sup>31</sup>For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged. <sup>32</sup>And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. <sup>33</sup>For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.

<sup>34</sup>Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. <sup>35</sup>And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church.

<sup>36</sup>Or did the word of God come originally from you? Or was it you only that it reached? <sup>37</sup>If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord. <sup>38</sup>But if anyone is ignorant, let him be ignorant.

<sup>39</sup>Therefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak with tongues. <sup>40</sup>Let all things be done decently and in order. (1 Corinthians 14:2-40)

Many today claim that tongues are for the believers to edify themselves. Paul explains that anyone that speaks in tongues, without interpretation, speaks to God and edifies himself or herself (vs. 2-4), which, at first glance, seems to support the idea. However, in the context of the chapter, Paul lays out this as a condemnation, not an instruction.

Consider verse 14: *“for if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful.”* Using sarcasm to prove how the Corinthian view of self-edification is wrong, he discredits the idea rather than endorsing it. The rest of chapter emphasizes that the purpose of spiritual gifts, specifically tongues, speaking is for the edification of the body, **not** one’s self. Paul must give instructions to the Corinthians because of their gross misuse of this gift.

He then explains why tongues without interpretation is useless. This is the most common (mis)use of tongues today. Seldom are tongues interpreted, and often are an element of a private prayer life. Truly, the flesh rejoices in the wasted time and effort of praying in tongues because it lacks the true communion with God and glories in self.

If tongues are so important, then why does Paul say that he *“would rather speak five words with understanding, ... than ten thousand words in a tongue”* (v. 19)? Paul goes even further and says that prophecy is better than tongues **because** it is in a common language and can edify the whole church.

Does speaking in tongues during private prayer edify? Yes, but only as it edifies the self, that is, the flesh, in believing oneself to be more spiritual. That is why Paul explains that spiritual gifts are not for private use. They are for edifying of the church, not self. Nowhere in Scripture is self-edification or selfishness encouraged!

Paul moves on to compare tongues with music. Instruments have a distinct sound so that they can be understood; otherwise, it is just noise. Music must be interpreted to be useful. It is the same with tongues. If it is not interpreted, it is noise. How would an army know what to do in battle if the trumpet could not be interpreted?

Tongues cannot edify the church, which is their purpose, if they are not interpreted. Paul shows that there is no profit in an unknown tongue. Moreover, Paul states that the purpose of tongues was for a **sign** to the **unbeliever** to believe the message of God, not for the believer! Is this not the way we see this gift of tongues or languages used in Acts 2? The believers spoke languages that they did not learn previously, but these languages **were** known to the unbelieving hearers.

The purpose of tongues with interpretation is for the edification of the church body, not to show the spiritual maturity of an individual. Spiritual gifts are not the measure of one’s level of maturity or spirituality. Love is.

## Conclusion

The current Charismatic movement views the gift of speaking in tongues as a priority for all believers, placing the greatest importance upon it as a test of spirituality. However, the Scriptures are clear that this modern phenomenon of speaking in tongues is the same practice that Paul had to correct in the Corinthian church. It is a clear misuse of the purpose of tongues. The purpose was for the edification of the church, not self, in a time when the Bible was not completed. It was not a sign of spirituality. There should be a diversity of spiritual gifts among

individuals for the sake of a functioning church body. It is very clear that God does not mandate the gift of tongues as a priority for the believer. The priority for every Christian is love.