

The Gift of Tongues

What We Believe and Practice at Renewal Church

A teaching paper for those who have received this gift, those who are seeking it, and those who are simply curious about what we believe.

Why This Matters: Prayer Is Intimacy, Not Duty

Before we can talk about tongues, we have to talk about prayer, because the gift of tongues is, at its heart, a gift of prayer.

Prayer takes on a different character when we are led and empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is not a dry religious duty that we must force ourselves to spend time doing for fifteen minutes a day. Box-checking prayer often loses the heart and life that God intends for it to carry. True prayer is intimacy with God.

In the early days of a relationship, when you are falling in love with someone, you never want to stop talking to them. Long conversations feel short when you're talking to someone you love. You aren't going through the motions and checking off a requirement; you're simply enjoying the presence of the beloved. This is a fundamental model for prayer. Keep it in mind as you read everything that follows. The gifts of the Spirit, including praying in tongues, are given first and foremost to deepen intimacy with God.

What the Gift Is

The Apostle Paul writes, "Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church" (1 Corinthians 14:4). He adds, "I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all" (v. 18). Praying in tongues, sometimes called praying in the Spirit, is the Spirit Himself praying through you, interceding with "groans that words cannot express" (Romans 8:26). It isn't limited by your intellectual capacity or creativity.

Here's what that looked like in my own life. Before I received this gift, there was a ceiling on my prayer life. I would often run out of words and not know what to say or how to pray. My mind would wander and I would end up repeating myself or simply running out of things to say. This wasn't because I didn't want to pray. It was because I would get caught in my head, and I didn't know how to pray from my spirit.

Praying in the Spirit bypasses this struggle. I can pray in the Spirit for extended periods without running dry or losing focus. Oftentimes after praying in the Spirit, I find a sense of clarity and peace that I've been seeking. Ephesians 6:18 says, "Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests." Praying in the Spirit is a partnership that allows you to pray things that you don't even understand in perfect alignment with the heart of God.

What the Gift Is Not

This is one of the most misunderstood and controversial gifts in the Christian faith, so it's worth being just as clear about what it isn't.

It is not a trance or a takeover. Scripture answers this fear directly. Paul gives instructions about when to speak in tongues and when to remain silent (1 Corinthians 14:27–28), instructions that only make sense if the person praying can start and stop at will. He states it plainly: "The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets" (1 Corinthians 14:32). If you have received this gift, you exercise it. You choose when to pray this way, just as you choose when to pray in English. You are never out of control.

It is not a performance of emotion. There is a false view that prayer has to work itself up into a certain level of emotional intensity to count. The danger of this mindset is that it makes prayer about your performance rather than God's presence. There will certainly be times you are overcome emotionally while praying, but it won't be forced or generated. It will come as the result of a dynamic encounter with the living presence of the Lord. Hannah Whitall Smith wrote, "Cease to consider your emotions, for they are only the servants; and regard simply your will, which is the real king in your being. Is that given up to God? Is that put into His hands?" Your will matters more than your emotions, and faith is trusting that God hears, responds, and communicates in spite of the ebb and flow of our emotional lives. If you received this gift in a powerful moment at camp or in a worship service, that environment doesn't need to be re-created every time for the gift to be real.

It is not a trophy or a badge of rank. The gifts of the Spirit are not meant to be trophies of personal accomplishment. The church at Corinth made exactly this mistake, treating tongues as the proof of being *pneumatikos*, "the truly spiritual ones," and Paul spent an entire chapter dismantling that idea. A believer who prays in tongues is not more loved by God or of a higher rank than one who doesn't. This leads to an important word for some of you:

If You Haven't Received This Gift

Nothing is wrong with you, and you are not a second-tier Christian. If you desire this gift, the invitation of Jesus is wide open:

"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you... Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:9–13)

Notice something else this passage settles: a good father doesn't hand his child a snake when he asks for a fish. If you sincerely ask the Father for the Holy Spirit, you don't need to fear receiving something counterfeit or dark. God gives good gifts. So ask! Don't be anxious, don't strive, and don't compare yourself to anyone else's experience or timeline.

A word about "initial evidence." Some of our Pentecostal brothers and sisters teach that speaking in tongues is the necessary initial evidence of being baptized in the Holy Spirit, meaning that if you haven't spoken in tongues, you haven't yet been filled. We honor that

tradition and share its hunger for the fullness of the Spirit, but we don't find that requirement in Scripture. Paul asks, "Do all speak in tongues?" and the way he asks the question in the original Greek expects the answer to be no (1 Corinthians 12:30).

History bears this out. John Wesley and George Whitefield preached to tens of thousands in open fields under extraordinary anointing of the Holy Spirit, and revival broke out wherever they went. Charles Finney described his baptism of the Holy Spirit as wave after wave of "liquid love" washing over him, and entire towns came under conviction through his ministry. Charles Spurgeon and D.L. Moody carried an unmistakable empowering of the Spirit that shook two continents. Yet we have no record that any of these Christian leaders ever spoke in tongues. And who could read church history honestly and say they weren't filled with the Spirit? The evidence of the Spirit's fullness is power to witness (Acts 1:8) and the fruit of a transformed life (Galatians 5:22–23). Tongues is a beautiful gift, and it is available to all who ask.

My personal belief is that this gift was available to these great leaders as well, but the church of their day neither taught nor expected it, so they never pursued it as part of the full inheritance of being filled with the Holy Spirit. This doesn't diminish the great impact on the Kingdom that came through their Spirit-empowered ministry.

Why We Don't Practice Uninterpreted Tongues in Sunday Morning Worship

One question some have asked is: if this gift is so valuable, why don't we hear it from the front of the church on Sunday morning?

Sometimes Spirit-filled believers want a dramatic expression of tongues on a regular basis in the Sunday worship service. We believe this is contrary to the practical instruction Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 14:19–25. This passage has a tendency to be very confusing, so it's worth walking through carefully.

Paul first addresses what was happening at Corinth: "When you are praising God in the Spirit, how can someone else, who is now put in the position of an inquirer, say 'Amen' to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying? You are giving thanks well enough, but no one else is edified" (14:16–17). The Corinthians had elevated the gift of tongues in a way that didn't edify the body gathered for worship. Newcomers were confused and didn't know what was happening. Paul immediately reminds them this isn't a criticism of tongues itself. "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you" (v. 18), he writes, "but in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue" (v. 19).

Then Paul turns to Scripture, quoting Isaiah 28:11–12: "With other tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord." In Isaiah, unintelligible foreign tongues were a sign of judgment. God was speaking to a people who refused to understand.

That's the key to Paul's puzzling statement in verse 22: "Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers." The New Testament scholar Gordon Fee argues that Paul is answering the Corinthians' own position here. Simply put, their argument was: "Tongues prove

God is here and we are spiritual." Paul quotes Isaiah and answers: what tongues actually signal to the uncomprehending outsider is judgment. Exclusion, not welcome. It's a negative sign, not a positive one. So when the whole church speaks in tongues and an inquirer walks in, "will they not say that you are out of your mind?" (v. 23). You have accidentally recreated the Isaiah scenario in your own worship space.

Prophecy, on the other hand, is intelligible, Spirit-inspired speech, and it works the opposite way: "They are convicted of sin... as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare. So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!'" (vv. 24–25). The unbeliever still feels judgment, but it is judgment that leads to understanding! It's the judgment of conviction, not exclusion. There is a living God, and He is here! He knows the secrets of my heart!

So at Renewal, our practice follows Paul's: tongues has its full, treasured place in our private prayer lives, in ministry times, and in focused gatherings of prayer and seeking. Our primary public gatherings prioritize what edifies and is intelligible to everyone in the room, including the person walking through our doors for the first time, wondering if there is a living God who can meet their needs.

If You Have Received This Gift: Use It

Paul never tells us to shelve the gift. He tells us to steward it. Some practical guidance:

Use it in your daily prayer time. Use it in the car, in the quiet moments of your day, when you don't know how to pray about a situation, or when you've simply run out of words. Praying without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17) often looks like this. The habit of your mind is to reflect on God and His presence even during simple activities like washing the dishes or mowing the yard. Brother Lawrence called prayer "an habitual, silent, and secret conversation of the soul with God." Praying in the Spirit fits naturally into exactly that kind of life.

And remember what it's producing. My grannie used to wear an overpowering perfume. When you'd hug her, you'd come away smelling just like her. In 2 Corinthians 2:15, Paul writes, "For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing." When we spend time with God through Christ and His Holy Spirit, His aroma rubs off on us, and spreads to others, just like my Grannie's perfume!

This is the church we want to be, not a group of super-spiritual people accomplishing something for ourselves, but a people so saturated with the aroma of Christ that encountering God happens simply when people walk through the door.

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