

# **The Gift of Tongues**

**A Valley Bible Church Position Paper**  
**www.valleybible.net**

Perhaps the most notable aspect of the charismatic movement is the claim of speaking in tongues. In common charismatic theology, speaking in tongues follows the special filling or baptism of the Holy Spirit. They base this belief on the examples in Acts 2, 10 and 19. They believe that the practice of tongues speaking brings great benefits for the Christian's spiritual life and vitalizes one's prayer life.

Because so many Christians are unfamiliar with the biblical teaching on the gift of tongues, they are being misled by the charismatic redefinition of tongues. This problem is compounded by a prevailing attitude that our personal experience is an authoritative source of truth, even equal to God's Word. Often, if a person thinks he has spoken in tongues the discussion is over. In addition, those who question the modern practices among charismatic Christians are considered critical and divisive. Nevertheless, we are compelled to explain and defend the biblical gift of tongues, including its nature, purpose and duration.

## **The gift of tongues is not an ecstatic utterance**

The typical charismatic view of the gift of tongues is that it is the God given ability to speak in an earthly or heavenly language without prior knowledge of that language. While charismatics usually acknowledge that Acts 2 shows that tongues is an earthly language, many of them believe from 1 Corinthians 13:1 and 1 Corinthians 14 that Paul spoke in a heavenly tongue or ecstatic utterance also.

While early Pentecostals of the first half of the twentieth century often viewed tongues speaking as human languages, this over time gave way to a view that all tongues speaking was an ecstatic utterance of an unknown language. Today, the increasingly common charismatic view of tongues sees a difference between the tongues of Acts and the tongues of 1 Corinthians 14. Under this teaching, when a Christian is baptized with the Holy Spirit, the tongues that necessarily result are an actual human language as seen in Acts 2. This type of tongues should be evidenced by all and is not the gift of tongues of 1 Corinthians which is not bestowed on all (1 Corinthians 12:30). In this view the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians is not an earthly, foreign language but is an ecstatic utterance. Charismatics have described this type of gibberish as a "heavenly language," or "the tongues of angels" from 1 Corinthians 13:1.

However, the gift of tongues should be understood as always referring to a miraculously given ability to speak in an actual human language that was foreign to the speaker.

Paul in other verses uses the term "tongue" as a figure of speech for a statement made in a human language (Romans 3:13; 14:11; Philippians 2:11). Other New Testament writers use the term "tongue" as a figure of speech for a statement made

in a human language (Acts 2:11; Revelation 5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15). Also, the Greek translation of the Old Testament has thirty references to tongue that refer to normal speech and none that refer to unintelligible speech. There is no place in the Scripture where the word “tongue” means ecstatic speech.

Also, the verb “speak” in 1 Corinthians 13:1 is in the subjunctive mood. The subjunctive mood in Greek assumes an unreality, or something not presently the case. Paul was not speaking in tongues of angels, but only used that phrase to make a hypothetical case based on a hyperbole. Furthermore, there is no evidence that angels use a heavenly language, for when they communicate in Scripture they use normal human language (Luke 1:11-37, 2:8-14).

Acts 2 gives a description of the gift of tongues in practice at the founding of the church. In this incident it is very clear that tongues was an actual human language (Acts 2:6). This weighs strongly in favor of the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians also being an actual human language. It is also important to note that Paul, the author of 1 Corinthians, and Luke, the author of Acts, were close companions. Neither of them give any indication that the tongues that were present in Acts 2 differed in any way from the tongues of 1 Corinthians 14. There must be compelling evidence before we adopt a change in definition and in this case none exists.

Tongues need to be interpreted (1 Corinthians 14:5, 13), which normally has the sense of “translation” (cf. John 9:7; Acts 9:36 and Hebrews 7:2), which indicates that there is to be a translation of a foreign language. You cannot translate ecstatic speech or gibberish. While 1 Corinthians 14 describes the problem of the speech being unintelligible (vv. 9, 14) it is unintelligible because there is no one with the gift of interpretation, not because it is in essence ecstatic and unknowable. Furthermore, it is obvious that the gift of tongues was not an uncontrollable ecstatic utterance since Paul gives instructions on the control of the gift (1 Corinthians 14:27-28).

In addition, Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11-12 in 1 Corinthians 14:21, which is referring to the strange tongues of the Assyrians, an actual foreign language.

The New Testament presents the purpose of tongues speaking as primarily a sign or convincing miracle (1 Corinthians 14:22), and only secondarily as the communication of a message. In Acts and in 1 Corinthians communication alone could have been conducted without the use of tongues. Mere ecstatic utterances will not be convincing since anyone can babble and pagan religions practice the same activity.

Like the gift of healing appears to foreshadow the redemption of the body from the judgment of God in Genesis 3, the gift of tongues appears to foreshadow the reconciliation of the languages from the judgment of God in Genesis 11 at the Tower of Babel. Just as the judgment of Genesis 11 created actual languages, the gift of tongues enabled communication through actual languages. Babbling does not foreshadow the reconciliation of the judgment of Genesis 11.

Understanding tongues as an actual human language rather than as a babbling utterance is extremely important for evaluating the charismatic practice of ecstatic utterances. It is essential for charismatics to redefine the biblical gift of tongues as an ecstatic utterance in order to validate their practice of babbling. If the gift of tongues is understood in the biblical sense of a supernatural ability to speak in a language that has never been learned, then it is clear that the current charismatic practices are not biblical tongues speaking.

Some have sought to overcome this critical problem by claiming that they really are speaking in a language that can be interpreted even though there is no evidence. They reason that simply because no one can understand their tongues speaking does not mean they are not speaking in a actual language. This claim however is void of any supporting evidence. If a person is really speaking a real language then a listener ought to be edified by the words. Paul's whole point in 1 Corinthians 14:1-19 is to teach that tongues are of no value if no one understands what is being said. If someone today does understand the charismatic utterance, then what language is being spoken? When someone claims to understand, they do so based on a supposed gift of interpretation, not because they are understanding the tongues speaker in their native language (as was the case in Acts 2). This speaking that no one can understand validates nothing and is useless.

### **The gift of tongues is not a prayer language to speak to God**

The purpose of tongues according to charismatic theology is to edify the individual and, if interpreted, to also edify the church. Tongues speaking is often taught as particularly useful in communication with God through prayer. However, this understanding is in direct conflict with the biblical purpose of the gift of tongues.

1 Corinthians 14 teaches there is one unified purpose for all spiritual gifts, namely edification. 1 Corinthians 14:22 clearly describes the specific groups of people that were to be edified by tongues and prophecy. Prophecy, as direct revelation from God, is necessarily intended for those who already believe and are expected to respond to the revelation. Tongues on the other hand is a sign for unbelievers, giving supernatural evidence of God's miraculous authority. As unbelievers hear the tongues message in their own language, spoken by people whom they do not expect to be able to communicate in such a way, they will recognize the ability to speak such words comes from God.

The appearances of tongues in the Book of Acts support the statement by Paul that tongues are a sign for unbelievers. In Acts 2 tongues were used to validate the message of the gospel to the unsaved Jews. In the other two instances of tongues speaking in the book of Acts, Acts 10:44-48 and 19:1-7, the context includes people who have just come to faith in Christ.

Therefore, tongues are intended to provide evidence in the context of the messages concerning salvation. The first problem with teaching that tongues are for praying to God is that 1 Corinthians 14:22 explains that the purpose of tongues is as an affirming sign for unbelievers, not for prayer to God. To say that tongues has an additional purpose of praying to God is unfounded.

There are several verses that are misused to argue that tongues is a prayer language. These verses are listed below, along with an explanation of them:

*1 Corinthians 14:2, “one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God.”*

He speaks to God because no one else understands him. This is not an exhortation to speak in tongues in order to communicate to God. It is rather a rebuke for speaking publicly in a language that no one understands, for the context of 1 Corinthians 14 is public speaking. God, being multi-lingual, is the only one able to understand.

*1 Corinthians 14:4, “one who speaks in a tongue edifies himself.”*

This is because, in contrast to prophecy (14:3-4), he is not edifying anyone else in the church. This is not an encouragement to speak in tongues privately in order to edify ourselves. It is rather a rebuke for speaking in a language that no one understands and thus does not edify anyone.

The Scripture does not instruct us to edify ourselves. Indeed, the Scripture considers the practice of self-edification to be a negative thing (Romans 15:2-3; 1 Corinthians 10:23-24; 10:33; 13:5). Spiritual gifts are by their very nature designed for serving others and are never for private use to serve ourselves (1 Corinthians 12:5-7). Paul’s reason for writing chapter 14 is to stop this practice of self-serving by the Corinthians.

Some claim Jude 20 commands self-edification, however not only is the verb “building yourselves up” not a Greek imperative (a command), it is actually speaking in the second person plural — that is, we, the church, are building up ourselves, the church. The individual is not being commanded to build up himself.

*1 Corinthians 14:14, “For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.”*

1 Corinthians 14:14 refers to praying in a tongue. However, based on 1 Corinthians 14:15-17, Paul does not mean private prayer but public prayer. This is then consistent with the earlier rebuke of speaking publicly in a language that was not understood by those who had gathered, which would be unfruitful. Because of the subjunctive mood of the Greek verb (“pray”) and the conditional clause (“if”), it is apparent that Paul is speaking hypothetically and is not describing his practice. Prayer in a tongue that is not interpreted is a negative event that is being spoken against, not a positive event that is being encouraged. The reason is that others are not being edified because they do not understand (14:15-17).

*1 Corinthians 14:18-19, “I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all; however, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind, that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.”*

Charismatics view 1 Corinthians 14:18-19 as saying Paul would rather speak in

tongues in private rather than speaking in the church. But Paul is not contrasting speaking “in the church” (14:19) with speaking in private. He is instead contrasting speaking “in the church” with speaking outside the church. This is not only the more natural contrast but it is the direct teaching of the following verses (4:20-25). In 14:19 Paul is using a hyperbole to encourage them to only use words that edify. Uninterpreted tongues fail to edify.

*1 Corinthians 14:27-28, “If anyone speaks in a tongue, {it should be} by two or at the most three, and {each} in turn, and let one interpret; but if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God.”*

1 Corinthians 14:28 is considered by some to be an encouragement to speak in tongues to ourselves and God. Yet here again Paul remains concerned about the gathering of the church and if no one is able to interpret the tongues speaking then the speaker should remain silent. The words “let him speak to himself and to God” is not telling him to pray in private but is telling him to be quiet and not speak out loud. This is consistent with the teaching of chapter 14 and is supported by the earlier statement that speaking in an uninterpreted tongue is not a fruitful thing for the mind (14:14).

*Romans 8:26, “And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for {us} with groanings too deep for words.”*

Many have tried to stretch Romans 8:26 to support their practice of praying in tongues. Many teach that when they pray a “Spirit-filled prayer” in a tongue, they are praying with “groanings too deep for words.” This is supposedly a prayer in a tongue that has a special degree of effectiveness.

However, the explicit teaching of Romans 8:26 has nothing to do with tongues speaking. First, it is the Holy Spirit who does the praying, not the believer. Second, the passage is speaking of all Christians, not just those who have the gift of tongues. Finally, in contrast to a supernatural ability to speak in a foreign language, the groaning (STENAZO) does not involve words. The Greek word means an unspoken sighing.

The obvious question that is outstanding to anyone who holds that tongues is a means of prayer is, “why would anyone feel the need to communicate to God in a tongue when they can communicate with God in their native language?” God is multi-lingual and there is simply no need to speak in a tongue to pray directly to God.

Charismatics may respond to this by testifying of the emotional, subjective experience that their utterances bring. While an emotional relationship with God is important, we must worship God in spirit and truth (John 4:24). In their attempt to relate to God through tongues we must ask the final question, “does the end justify the means?”

## **The gift of tongues is not active today**

To say that the gift of tongues is not active today does not mean that God is not able to produce true tongues speaking today. It only means that the evidence shows that He has chosen not to continue the gift of tongues beyond the apostolic church.

Also, when we use the phrase “modern tongues speaking” it refers to a practice of ecstatic utterances that is called tongues speaking by people today. It is not the tongues speaking which is found in the Bible.

Below are several reasons why we should conclude that biblical tongues speaking does not occur today:

### *Current tongues speaking is not linguistic speech*

There have been numerous studies of modern tongues speaking. The studies have involved thousands of examples. The unanimous conclusion of this research is that the charismatic practice of speaking in tongues does not fit the linguistic characteristics of language.

William Samarin, professor of linguistics at the University of Toronto, states that modern tongues speaking is “like language in some ways, but this is only because the speaker (unconsciously) wants it to be like language. Yet in spite of superficial similarities, it is fundamentally not language.”

William Welmes, professor of African Languages at UCLA, concluded his investigation with “And I must report without reservation that my sample does not sound like a language structurally. There can be not more than two contrasting vowel sounds, and a most peculiarly restricted set of consonant sounds; these combine into a very few syllable clusters which recur many times in various orders. The consonants and vowels do not all sound like English (the speakers native language), but the intonation patterns are so completely American English that the total effect is a bit ludicrous.”

Eugene Nida, a famous linguist of the American Bible Society wrote, “The types of inventory and distributions would indicate clearly that this recording bears no resemblance to any actual language which has ever been treated by linguists....If then, it is not a human language, what is it? One can only say that it is a form of ‘ecstatic speech.’...On the basis of what I have learned about this type of phenomena of ‘tongues’ in other parts of the world, apparently there is the same tendency to employ one’s own inventory of sounds, in nonsense combinations, but with simulated ‘foreign’ features.”

One Harvard linguistic study included over ten thousand incidents of modern tongues speaking. They listed several reasons why they came to the conclusion that modern tongues speaking is not an actual language:

1. The high frequency of repetition of the same sounds and phrases.

2. The similarity to the speaker's own language background. If the utterance is truly a foreign language never learned then why is it so similar to the speaker's native tongue?
3. The excessive use of one or two vowels.
4. The absence of any language structure.
5. The interpretations were consistently of significantly greater length than the tongue utterance. This would not be the case for a direct translation.
6. The inconsistency of interpretation regarding the same clause or phrase.
7. The "King James" style of interpretation. The interpretations would commonly employ the phraseology of 17th century English as is found in the King James Version of the Bible.
8. There is no known relationship between any example of tongues speaking and any known language of the world.

Those who consider tongues to be ecstatic speech are unaffected by this linguistic analysis because they are not claiming that their tongues speaking a known human language. However, they are faced with the problem that Acts 2 clearly depicts tongues as an actual known human language.

Since the biblical gift of tongues is an actual human language and since analysis of modern tongues speaking is not an actual human language we can conclude that modern tongues speaking is not the gift of tongues as found in the Bible.

### *Current tongues speaking is not unique to Christianity*

The modern practice of charismatic tongues speaking is not unique to the charismatic movement. This type of ecstatic speech is found among many religions, including Tibetan monks, Eskimos, African tribes and occult groups. Tradition reports that Mohammed spoke in tongues. Brigham Young spoke in tongues, interpreting his own messages and hundreds of elders spoke in tongues at the dedication of their temple in Salt Lake City. Tongues have also been reproduced in psychological studies.

Furthermore, the phenomenon was not unique to Christianity even in biblical times. From the oracle of Delphi, which was not far from Corinth, there were found ecstatic utterances. Dionysian rites contain tongues speaking as well as many magicians of the first century. These occurrences were not the tongues of languages but were mere babbling. They were, and continue to be, a counterfeit of God's true miracle of biblical tongues speaking.

This evidence demonstrates that what is currently practiced is not a supernatural sign of God and therefore it certainly does not validate God's revelation. This type of speech is certainly not validating other religions and few charismatics would want to be associated with them. Speaking an actual human language that you have never learned is demonstrative and verifiable proof of God's power unlike any ecstatic utterance.

### Current tongues speaking is a learned behavior

If tongues speaking as practiced today was truly a supernatural gift from God then we should expect this ability to exist without our need to teach someone so that they can perform tongues speaking. The New Testament gives no instructions on how to obtain the gift of tongues and never describes anyone being taught to speak in tongues. Yet charismatic teaching abounds with step-by-step booklets on “how to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit and speak in tongues.” In many charismatic fellowships, special services are regularly held to guide people to speak in tongues.

One representative example of charismatic instructions on how to speak in tongues comes from former television evangelist Robert Tilton:

*“You don’t beg for the Holy Spirit, or for the heavenly language. You simply ask for it and believe you receive it based on what God’s Word promises.... The Holy Spirit prompts you, or gives you utterance (Acts 2:4) to speak in the heavenly language. You then act on that utterance, and as a step of faith you begin to utter the syllables and words which suddenly come to your thoughts.”*

“Now speak. You speak the utterances coming to your thoughts. Speak them out loud. Faith is an act. Jesus called for us to walk on the water. Don’t even speak in English or a language you know. Speak the syllables on your lips. You are speaking in a new tongue. It sounds like gibberish? It’s repetitive? Don’t go by what it sounds like or what it feels like. Go by what the Bible says about it. It is a promise. It’s yours. You have done what the Bible has told you to do. Continue praying to God in tongues and expect to experience the comforter, the intercessor, the counselor, the advocate, the strengthener, the standby, and the source of power.”

“The Word of God is the seed. Satan is the fowl of the air that tries to steal the seed. In other words, he’ll sometimes come to your thoughts, attempting to convince you that your experience isn’t authentic. Stand by what the Bible tells you about it, not what your thoughts, your friends, or even your church says about it.”

While not all charismatics resort to this degree of pressure and manipulation, Tilton demonstrates that modern tongues is something that is a learned behavior. It is simply a case of some who practice ecstatic utterances produce this learned behavior in others. This is why modern tongues speaking can also be found among other religions, since they too can learn the behavior. As a learned behavior, modern tongues are not a sign to unbelievers, in contrast to what 1 Corinthians 14:22 says about tongues. Since unbelievers can learn to speak gibberish in the same way it can hardly be considered a sign or miracle.

Since charismatic tongues speaking is not linguistic speech, since it is practiced among other religions and since it must be learned, we must conclude that this modern practice is not biblical in its nature.



*The general testimony church history shows the cessation of tongues*

Cleon Rogers, scholar-missionary wrote, "It is significant that the gift of tongues is nowhere alluded to, hinted at or even found in the early writings of the Post Apostolic Fathers." Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, Origen, Chrysostom, and Augustine considered tongues a remote practice that happened in the very early days of Christianity.

In order to defend their view, some have attempted to show that tongues have been active throughout church history. Their evidence is two-fold:

1. Clear evidence of ecstatic utterances among heretical groups such as the Montanists of the second and third century, the Jansenists in the eighteenth century, Cevennot prophets who lived in France in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, the Shakers of the eighteenth century, the Irvingites in the nineteenth century. These are not groups whose practices should be our model. In some cases, their practice of ecstatic utterances was one reason for their condemnation by the Christian church.
2. Very unclear evidence of tongues speaking from orthodox Christian leaders. Some quote from ancient church leaders who are speaking about heretical groups. More often people read tongues into vague statements which are not referring to tongues speaking. We should not try to read into the writings of church history in order to get a noteworthy Christian figure on our side of the debate.

The general testimony of church history is that the gift of tongues has ceased. The most notable specific case to show this is the Montanists.

Montanism was a prophetic movement that practiced ecstatic utterances and claimed new revelation from God in the second century. Montanus fell into a trance in a village in Phrygia in 156 and reportedly began to "prophesy under the influence of the Spirit." Two young women also prophesied (Priscilla and Maximilla), and with their help the movement quickly spread through Asia Minor. Montanus claimed to have a new and final revelation, foretold the return of Christ and the establishment of the New Jerusalem in Phrygia, encouraged fasting and welcomed persecution.

Montanism got a brief boost from Tertullian, a leading church father who left the catholic church around 206 and joined with Montanism. Tertullian wrote about a Montanist church service:

"We have among us now a sister who has been granted gifts of revelations, which she experiences in church during the Sunday services through ecstatic vision in the Spirit....And after the people had been dismissed at the end of the service it is her custom to relate to us what she has seen.... 'Among other things,' says she, 'there was shown to me a soul in bodily form, and it appeared like a spirit; but it was no mere something, void of qualities, but rather a thing which could be grasped, soft and translucent and of ethereal color, in a form at all points human.'"

Augustine writes that Tertullian later abandoned Montanism and founded the Tertullianists. It is not uncommon for those advocating new revelation from God to separate themselves from those that taught them this falsehood in order to begin their own movement. Bishops in Asia Minor excommunicated the Montanists about 177. The Second Ecumenical Council, the Council of Constantinople in 381, which met with 150 church fathers to settle the Arian controversy and approved the Nicene Creed, decreed that Montanism was tantamount to paganism. Augustine also opposed this movement. The sect of Montanism survived until the 6th century. The failure of the Montanists and the early church's resolve against them caused those advocating special revelation from God to be viewed with great disdain until the twentieth century charismatic movement.

Another example of the view of the early church concerning biblical tongues speaking comes from John Chrysostom. John Chrysostom (c. 350 - 407 A.D.) was a leading figure in the fourth century. He was appointed the head of the church at Constantinople and was widely traveled and aware of the state of the early church. The Protestant reformers would later regard Chrysostom as a church father second only to Augustine, because he opposed allegorical interpretation and sought the exact, literal meaning of the text.

In *Homilies in First Corinthians*, Chrysostom writes the following regarding the miraculous spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14,

“This whole place is very obscure: but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place. And why do they not happen now? Why look now, the cause too of the obscurity has produced us again another question, namely, why did they then happen, and now do so no more?”

Thomas Edgar comments on the reason why Chrysostom stated that the passage is “very obscure”:

“They [miraculous gifts] no longer occurred in the Church and they had not occurred for a sufficient length of time that the facts regarding them had dropped from available knowledge, so that the passage is considered obscure by the time of this homily.”

The testimony of church history is that the biblical practice of tongues occurred during the time of the apostles. Since then there have not been claims of speaking in a language that one has never learned within orthodox Christianity until the modern charismatic movement of the twentieth century. The practices of ecstatic utterances were localized among heretic groups that were opposed by the true Christians. This overwhelming evidence that tongue ceased at the end of the apostolic era puts the burden of proof entirely upon the charismatics to show the validity of modern tongues speaking.

If the gift of tongues did not cease with the apostles, then how is the 1,800 year absence of tongues speaking within the true church explained? Some accept the ceasing of the gift of tongues with the early church and claim that the age of the

apostles was the former rain of Joel 2:23 and the twentieth century outbreak of tongues speaking is the latter rain. This is a flawed interpretation in that it allegorizes the word “rain.” “Rain” in Joel 2:23 means RAIN, not the twentieth century charismatic movement. In the Old Testament, the former rain comes in the spring and the latter rain comes in the autumn. Joel 2:23-26 teaches that in the millennium God will bring rain as He did before so crops will grow plentifully. It is also obvious from Joel 2:24-32 that the prophecies are yet to be completely fulfilled. We are still waiting for the prophecy of the millennial kingdom.

The charismatic movement simply has no answer to the testimony of church history. The Apostle Paul was correct when he wrote, “if there are tongues, they will cease” (1 Corinthians 13:8). The testimony of history demonstrates they have.

### 1 Corinthians 13:8 teaches the ending of the gift of tongues

1 Corinthians 13:8-13 specifically teaches that prophecy, tongues and knowledge will cease to exist. However, when the end of tongues will occur is debated. There are two basic views as to the timing of the end of prophecy, either prophecy will be done away at the second coming of Christ or prophecy will be done with the end of the apostolic age and completion of the New Testament.

The Old Testament depicts periods of special revelation which cease with the passing of prophets. The Book of Acts describes miracles, signs and wonder at a decreasing rate in the history of the early church. Church history validates the ceasing of prophetic revelation and the gifts that confirmed this revelation.

Why does **1 Corinthians 13:8** only include gifts associated with God’s revelation? All gifts will end with the return of Christ, so what would be the point of noting that these gifts in particular end with Christ? The gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 13:8 are the gifts of God’s revelation and they are set apart as passing away because God’s revelation to man has ended with the close of the New Testament and the passing of the apostles. It makes much more sense to describe them as ending with the close of the New Testament age which sets them apart from non-revelatory gifts.

Both interpretations regarding the timing of the cessation of tongues rest on the understanding of the word “perfect” in **1 Corinthians 13:10**. At issue is whether “perfect” is quantitative or qualitative. That is, whether “perfect” means a completing of what was incomplete, or whether “perfect” means a perfecting of what was imperfect.

The word for “perfect” (*TELEIOS*) in 1 Corinthians 13:10 has a well-established meaning of “complete.” Also, Paul never uses *TELEIOS* to mean absolute perfection, which occurs at the return of Christ. The completion of the God’s revelation fits Paul’s usage of *TELEIOS* much better.

Understanding *TELEIOS* in 1 Corinthians 13:10 as “complete” makes more sense than “perfect” because of the contrast with “partial.” The completed Scripture is the reason why the partial, or incomplete, prophecy and knowledge are done away, for they are no longer necessary. This is better than trying to contrast the perfection of

Christ's return with the imperfection of prophecy and knowledge. Prophecy is not imperfect, it is rather incomplete. This then consistently views both "in part" and "perfect" as quantitative, rather than "in part" as quantitative and "perfect" as qualitative.

In other words, since prophecy is not partly perfect, but rather part of a whole, it makes more sense to understand "perfect" as "complete." We know in part before the completion of the New Testament (1 Corinthians 13:9) and with the completion of the canon the partial revelation of prophecy will be done away (1 Corinthians 13:10).

Also, **1 Corinthians 13:11** describes a development from childhood to maturity, which is not instantaneous but gradual. This does not fit the return of Christ. It rather fits the gradual reduction of prophecy as the New Testament was being written and the apostles and prophets passed on.

**1 Corinthians 13:12** is why most interpret this passage as referring to the return of Christ. Phrases like "face to face" and "knowing fully" can make people jump to this conclusion. However, it is important to note that even if 1 Corinthians 13:12 is speaking about the return of Christ this does not undermine the view that tongues will end with the completion of God's revelation with the apostolic age. The partial being done away does not need to mean that we then know fully (1 Corinthians 13:12). This final knowledge could be a separate occasion at the coming of Christ with 1 Corinthians 13:11 describing the increasing completeness of God's revelation and 13:12 describing the absolute completeness at the return of Christ.

However the better explanation is to view 1 Corinthians 13:12 as teaching that with the completion of the biblical revelation, we will know ourselves fully, as we are fully known. The metaphor of the mirror (*ESOPRON*) is used only in one other place in the New Testament, in James 1:23 where it refers to God's revelation in the Bible. Plus, we look at ourselves in a mirror, not at God. Also, when the phrase "face to face" is used about God and man in the Bible, it normally means God's revelation to man, not God's fellowship with man. God's complete revelation enables us to see ourselves in as in a mirror face to face, completely, rather than as in a mirror dimly, partially. With God's complete revelation, we are able to understand God's view of us in a way not possible before.

Finally, this view explains the contrast of 1 Corinthians 13:13. In contrast to the three gifts which will not endure throughout the church age (prophecy, tongues and knowledge) are the three virtues which will endure throughout the age (faith, hope and love). This temporal understanding of the virtues is further affirmed when we learn that love is the greatest, in that it alone is permanent while faith and hope will be fulfilled when we see Christ face to face (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:6-8; Romans 8:24-25).

If prophecy and knowledge will be done away with the canon of Scripture is completed, then it follows that the ceasing of tongues will occur also at that time since they are grouped together in verse eight. The significance of the terms "cease" for tongues and "done away" for knowledge and prophecy is in regard to the process

of how the cessation will occur, not with regard to timing of when the cessation will occur. This minor distinction is due to the nature of tongues as validating sign of the messenger and message of God's direct revelation. After God ends the revelation of knowledge and prophecy, the evidence affirming the revelation is no longer necessary and thus ceases to exist all by itself. The ceasing of tongues as taught in 1 Corinthians 13:8 is the natural result of the end of God's special revelation in the age of the apostles.

*The cessation of direct revelation from God shows the cessation of tongues.*

As we have seen, 1 Corinthians 13:8 teaches the gift of tongues is no more in operation today than is prophecy and knowledge. There is no longer a need to validate God's revelation since the end of the New Testament has brought the end of direct revelation from God during the church age. There will be prophecy occurring again after the church age, during the seven-year tribulation period (cf. Revelation 11). Tongues is not an active spiritual gift because its very purpose for existing is no longer active.

Since God is not giving new revelation today through His appointed messengers, He is likewise not enabling anyone to speak supernaturally in a language they do not know. This is because biblical tongues speaking served the purpose of affirming the messengers and their message by demonstrating His miraculous power in association with their prophetic ministry. The conclusion of prophetic revelation produced an end to the gift of tongues that had served to validate the revelation that was given by God.

### **Why understanding that tongues have ceased is important**

As we have seen, the biblical gift of tongues was the ability to speak in an actual foreign language which the speaker had never studied. The purpose of the gift of tongues was as a sign to unbelievers in order to validate God's messengers and His message.

Since biblical tongues speaking affirmed God's revelation and since God has chosen to close His revelation to man in this age with the conclusion of the New Testament, the need for the gift of tongues is no longer present. Therefore, the charismatic movement has distorted the meaning, practice and purpose of the biblical gift of tongues.

Unlike when the Pentecostal movement arose in the early part of the twentieth century, most Christians who are not charismatic have taken a tolerant view of charismatic tongues speaking. More recently we have seen our society becoming quite tolerant of divergent beliefs and practices. This tolerance has also been manifested in the church in many ways. As long as an utterance does not disrupt a church their church service, contemporary Christianity has chosen to no longer challenge the truth about charismatic tongues speaking in the name of the unity of the body of Christ.

Worse yet, those who are willing to teach the truth about the current tongues practice of the charismatic movement are often denounced for doing so. The spirit of modern evangelicalism is more committed to reaching beyond denominational barriers to demonstrate the “power of unity” than it is committed to seeking and teaching truth.

The following review of some of the damage cause by charismatic tongues speaking should cause us to become more aggressive in our opposition to the corruption of God’s unique gift to the church.

1. The misunderstanding of the biblical gift of tongues has allowed the pagan religious practice of ecstatic utterances into the public and private worship of the true God.
2. The misunderstanding of the biblical gift of tongues has greatly diminished the appreciation for the significance of the miraculous gift of tongues that God gave in the apostolic era.
3. The misunderstanding of the biblical gift of tongues has resulted in a great confusion over the true meaning of tongues in the Bible.
4. The misunderstanding of the biblical gift of tongues has caused a division in the universal church and in many local churches over this issue.
5. The misunderstanding of the biblical gift of tongues has caused Christians who do not practice charismatic tongues speaking to be considered by charismatics as not being baptized with the Holy Spirit. The result of this is those believers in charismatic churches who are not practicing their ecstatic babbling are led to believe they do not have the power of the Holy Spirit.
6. The misunderstanding of the biblical gift of tongues has caused churches that do not practice charismatic tongues speaking to be considered cold and lifeless.
7. The misunderstanding of the biblical gift of tongues has hurt the ministry of prayer among those who in a misguided attempt to communicate with God are babbling.
8. The misunderstanding of the biblical gift of tongues has encouraged an unhealthy mystical element of spirituality to exist within Christianity. This is a failed attempt to meet our spiritual hunger.
9. The misunderstanding of the biblical gift of tongues has caused unbelievers to think just what Paul said they would think when they heard communication that no one understood...”you are mad!”

These problems should be significant enough to make us unapologetic in our opposition to the modern tongues movement.

## **Conclusion**

A strong case has been made to show that the biblical gift of tongues is no longer functioning. This case is based on more than just the fact that we do not see the true gift of tongues today. While it is true that we do not see it, that alone does not preclude its possible existence.

Our case is based on more than the fact that from the first century, we have not seen the functioning of the biblical gift of tongues. While the testimony of church history is also a weighty argument against the current practice of ecstatic speaking, it alone does not yet preclude the possible existence of the gift of tongues.

While these arguments should not lead us to in any way support modern charismatic tongues speaking, someone could still claim that just because we have not seen it and others have not seen it does not necessarily mean that the biblical gift of tongues has ceased. To arrive firmly at that conclusion requires even more support.

The reason why we believe the gift of tongues has ceased to exist with the passing of the New Testament apostles and prophets is based on what the Bible says. The Scripture teaches that tongues will cease in 1 Corinthians 13:8 and that cessation coincides with the completion of prophecy for the church age. Tongues and prophecy are directly related to each other in God's Word because tongues is a sign to the unbelieving world that God is revealing Himself.

Since prophecy has been done away with until the end of the church age with the return of Christ at the rapture, the gift of tongues has correspondingly ceased. Since God is no longer giving new revelation today, there is no longer any use for the gift of tongues as a validating sign of God's revelation to man.

*Completed: April 2001*