

## **SPEAKING IN TONGUES AND SIGN GIFTS**

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There is much controversy today in the church about the topic of speaking in tongues. However, I am not certain that most Christians really understand what it is all about. As I began my own personal study on this topic, I was surprised greatly by my first finding. I expected the Bible to be jam packed with verses and references about tongues. To my utter surprise I found that speaking in tongues was never a major topic in the New Testament. In fact, it is mentioned in only 3 of the 27 New Testament books (Mark, Acts, and 1 Corinthians) and in only 7 of the 260 New Testament chapters. It seems to me that the church has made this topic a much bigger deal than it was ever meant to be in Scripture.

### **Experience versus truth**

Before we look at what the Bible teaches about sign gifts and speaking in tongues, it is important to first answer the question, “What is the relationship that exists between experience and truth?” The answer is the foundation that we will use as we discuss sign gifts. From a Biblical perspective it is vital to realize that experience does not provide a basis for our faith. Rather it is faith which provides a basis for our experiences.

This is exemplified in many instances in Scripture. In 2 Peter 1:19-21, Peter tells of the day that he was witness to the transfiguration of Christ. On that day, Peter saw Jesus glorified with his own eyes and heard the voice of God with his own ears. Now that’s a pretty fair experience. Yet, Peter ends this passage by saying that we have an even “more sure” word of prophecy. “More sure” than what? More sure than seeing God with our own eyes or hearing God with our own ears. What is this “more sure” thing? It is the inspired Scriptures. It is obvious that Peter put the truth of God’s Word over experience.

Paul did the same thing. He had incredible experiences, yet it was Scripture, not experience, which was the heart of Paul’s message (Acts 17:2-3; 28:23). God Himself says that only Scripture is sufficient (Ps 19:7-14; 2 Tim 3:15-17). According to 2 Timothy 3:17, in Scripture God gives to us everything we need to know to do everything He wants us to do.

Jesus taught that to build theology on experience is to build on sand. In the end, it all comes crumbling down. However, to build on the Word is to build on the rock that is firm and stable (Matthew 7:24-27). In John 17:17, Jesus also taught that it is the Word, not our experiences, that must be our authority for all things. In the end we must judge all teachings by one thing...the Word (Acts 17:11)...not experience.

This is where the topic of sign gifts like speaking in tongues, healing and miracles becomes difficult. So many want to start with an experience they have had, seen or heard of and then build a theology to support these experiences. I am going to take the opposite path. I am not going to look at any experiences. Instead, let’s just look at what the Bible says, even if it goes contrary to an experience in your life.

### **What is speaking in tongues?**

What exactly is speaking in tongues? There are two different views. The first view is that speaking in tongues is an ecstatic utterance or angel talk. In other words it is not a human

language but a heavenly language. Many believe it to be the language of the angels. The second view is that speaking in tongues is speaking in a known human language never before learned by the speaker. It would be like me, never ever being taught one word of German, suddenly being able to preach in fluent German.

So which is it? Is tongues “angel talk” or is it being able to speaking in a known human language that one has never learned? In the book of Acts, on the Day of Pentecost, the followers of Jesus spoke in tongues. It is very obvious from this passage that these disciples were speaking in known human languages (Acts 2:6, 8, 11). The exact languages they spoke in are specifically mentioned. In fact, in Scripture, angels are always heard speaking in a known human language.

Those who believe that tongues is “angel talk” often point to Paul as claiming that he spoke in the language of the angels in 1 Corinthians 13:1. Was Paul really claiming in this passage to have spoken in tongues of angels? I think a careful study of the passage would say the opposite. In this passage, Paul was speaking in a form of hyperbole...an exaggeration for emphasis. All of the illustrations he uses are exaggerations for emphasis. Paul talked about knowing all mysteries. Did Paul know all mysteries? Obviously not. He spoke of moving mountains. Is there any verse in Scripture that tells us that Paul moved a mountain? Not one. Paul spoke of being burned to death. Was Paul ever burnt at the stake? Of course, not. These were all hyperboles. Paul was using this passage, not to teach on “angel talk,” but rather to teach on the supremacy of love.

All of these descriptions in 1 Corinthians 13:1 are written in the subjunctive mood showing that he is speaking in the realm of possibility, not reality. If Paul were writing these descriptions as factual and historical statements he would have used the indicative mood which is the mood of reality. Paul is simply saying this:

*“Even if I could speak with the tongues of angels but did not have love, it would be useless. Even if I could know all mysteries but did not have love, it would be useless. Even if I could move literal mountains with my faith but did not have love, it would be useless. Even if I made the ultimate sacrifice and allowed my body to be burned at the stake but did not have love, it would be useless.”*

Again, Paul is not teaching on the reality of “angel talk,” he is speaking on the supremacy of love. To base a doctrine of angel talk on this one passage of Scripture is a very weak basis to build such a theology.

### **What was the purpose of speaking in tongues?**

So we conclude that speaking in tongues was the ability to speak fluently in a known human language that one had never before learned. But what was the Purpose for speaking in tongues? 1 Corinthians 14:22 tells us that speaking in tongues was a sign gift and that sign gifts were for unbelievers. Sign gifts validated to the listener that a message or messenger was from God (Acts 2:22; 2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:3-4). Back in the New Testament days they did not have the completed Scriptures. Many men were claiming to speak for God. How did people know which of these messengers was really from God and which were not? God gave sign gifts like speaking in tongues, healing and miracles to validate that these men were truly from God. When the unlearned and ignorant disciples spoke in languages they never before had learned on the Day of Pentecost, the listeners were in awe and knew that their message was really from God (Acts 2:7-8).

## **Is the gift of speaking in tongues still for today?**

So we have learned that speaking in tongues was the ability to speak in a known human language never before learned and that its purpose was to validate to unbelievers that the message of the Apostles were really from God. Now comes the million dollar question. Is the gift of tongues still for today? Again, let's set any experiences you may have had, seen or heard of to the side and begin by looking only at what the Bible says on this topic.

1 Corinthians 13:8 teaches that tongues would cease. There is no debating that fact. The question is, "Has this happened yet?" I think it has. After the writing of 1 Corinthians, tongues are never mentioned again in Scripture. Paul said in 1 Corinthians that tongues would cease and no other writer, including Paul himself, mentions them in any subsequent book of the Bible. In fact, Paul himself wrote up to 12 more books of the Bible (depending on if you think he wrote Hebrews or not) but never mentioned tongues. In two of Paul's books (Romans and Ephesians), Paul even teaches on the doctrine of spiritual gifts but he never even mentions tongues. Four other men, who all spoke in tongues on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, wrote books after 1 Corinthians but none of them ever mentioned tongues (John wrote 4 books; Peter wrote 2 books; James wrote 1 book; and Jude also wrote 1 book).

The writer of Hebrews states that sign gifts had already ceased. In Hebrews 2:3-4, the author says that God "confirmed" his message through sign gifts. The word "confirmed" is in the aorist tense showing a past, completed action. If the writer was saying that God was still confirming or validating His word through signs gifts like tongues, it would have been written in the present tense. The use of the aorist tense tells us that at the time of the writing of Hebrews, God using sign gifts to validate his Word was a past, complete action. It was no longer taking place.

## **What caused tongues to cease?**

So based on these facts, I believe that tongues has ceased. But what caused tongues to cease? 1 Corinthians 13:8-12 teaches that tongues would cease when that which is perfect came. There are two major views as to the identity of "that which is perfect." One view is that it is speaking of Christ's second coming. If this were the case, some would argue that Jesus has not returned yet, so tongues have not ceased yet. The second view, which is the view I hold, is that "that which is perfect" is speaking of the completed Scriptures.

What reasons indicate that this is a reference to the completed Scriptures? First of all, the adjective used is neuter, not masculine. It is speaking of a thing rather than a person. I believe that if it were a reference to Christ returning, that the adjective would have been used in a masculine form.

Second, the word "perfect" is never used in Scripture to refer to the second coming. It is used, however, to refer to the Bible. In James 1:25, Scripture is called the "perfect" law of liberty. James also uses another like reference. In 1 Corinthians we are told that when that which is perfect comes we will look into a mirror clearly. The term "mirror" is also used in James 1:23-25, again in correlation with the Bible. Some would argue that 1 Corinthians 13 speaking of seeing "face to face" when that which is perfect comes must be a reference to seeing Jesus face to face. Thus, that which is perfect must be speaking of the second coming. However, the term "face to face" can also fit seeing God clearly through Scripture which we have already seen is "more sure" than seeing God with our own eyes (2 Peter 1:19-21).

How does this affect the teaching of 1 Corinthians 13 regarding tongues? If that which is perfect is a reference to the completed Scripture, then the gift of tongues would cease with the completion of the New Testament. There is no longer a need for sign gifts to validate that a message is truly from God. Scripture is now our validation that a message is from God

But what if “that which is perfect” is a reference to the Second Coming? Does this mean that speaking in tongues is still a gift being given today? This does not mean that tongues are for today. Tongues still would have ceased. We learn this from the different Greek usages in the passage. 1 Corinthians 13:8 speaks of three different gifts. It says that tongues would “cease.” This is a Greek word meaning to stop abruptly. It is written in the middle voice indicating that it stops in and of itself. In other words, no outside event or force is needed to cause it to stop

On the other hand, 1 Corinthians 13 says that the gifts of prophecy and knowledge would “be done away.” This is a Greek word meaning to reduce to inactivity. It is not written in the middle voice as tongues ceasing was. This is written in the passive voice indicating that this reduction is caused by an outside force. As a result we learn that prophecy and knowledge would be dependent on the coming of that which is perfect in order to stop but that tongues would stop on its own (and all the above evidence shows that it has).

### **What about speaking in tongues in 1 Corinthians 14?**

What about tongues in 1 Corinthians 14? Doesn't this passage give Biblical credibility for speaking in tongues still being an active gift today? It is important to note that this chapter is a rebuke, not a commendation, for the Corinthian's misuse of tongues. When you read the chapter with that realization it provides the basis needed for proper interpretation. It is also important to note that there is a difference between the true gift of tongues and the false gift of tongues being used by the Corinthians. This is seen in Paul using the word “tongue” singular and the word “tongues” plural. Tongue (singular) speaks of a counterfeit gift, that of ecstatic utterances. Tongues (plural) speaks of the authentic gift, that of speaking in a known language you had never before learned. This is why the King James Version of the Bible puts the word “unknown” before the singular usage showing that it was not the authentic spiritual gift. The only exception to this is in verse 27 where a singular man is speaking a single genuine language.

John MacArthur's book, *Charismatic Chaos*, does a wonderful job of interpreting this chapter. In 1 Corinthians 14 we learn that the usage of tongues as an ecstatic utterance was not edifying to the church (v1-5). In doing so, they were speaking to “God” (literally “a god”) not to man because no one could understand them. The Bible records no instance of believers speaking to God in anything but a normal, intelligible language. True ministry is one that builds up others, this does not happen when one speaks in ecstatic utterances (v3-4). Paul was not advocating that everyone speak in tongues (that is impossible, according to 1 Corinthians 12:30). He was simply showing that he did not despise the true gift which was still operational at the time Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians (v5). The need for understanding was so essential that even the true gift was not to be used without someone to interpret (v5)

In 1 Corinthians 14, their usage of tongues as an ecstatic utterance was unintelligible (v6-12). Paul teaches that any message is useless without understanding (v6). For music to be music, it must be intelligible (v7). A bugle means nothing to a soldier unless a call is played (v8). A language without meaning is pointless (v10-11). Our goal in using spiritual gifts is to edify the church (v12)

Paul further teaches that the effect of tongues as an ecstatic utterance was emotional, not rational (v13-19). To pray or sing in an ecstatic utterance without any understanding of what is being said (“the mind”) is unfruitful (v13-15). In the church, five words spoken which can be understood are better than 10,000 words spoken in an ecstatic utterance that no one can understand.

As we have already seen, in 1 Corinthians 14 the usage of tongues as an ecstatic utterance does not fit the purpose of tongues (v20-25). Tongues (plural...the true gift) was a sign to unbelievers. Prophecy (that which can be understood) was a sign to believers.

In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul teaches that the procedure for tongues in the church was to be systematic and orderly (v26-28). This church was doing everything all at the same time (v26). Remember, the purpose for tongues (or anything else) was to be edification (v26). For this to take place, four regulations were given. First, only two or three persons should speak. Second, they should speak in turn. Third, what they say should be interpreted. And fourth, if no one is present to interpret, they should not speak. Even if the gift of tongues was still operable today, and I do not believe that is the case, these same conditions would need to be followed to be Biblically correct.

### **What about Peter’s quoting from Joel 2:28-32 on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17-21)?**

On the Day of Pentecost, when the disciples spoke in tongues, Peter explained this phenomenon by quoting from Joel 2:28-32 talking about the signs of what the Bible calls the Last Days. When you look at the preceding verses in Acts you find that Peter is refuting the claim that these disciple’s actions were a result of their being drunk. He uses the Joel passage to show that this is not a result of drunkenness but an act of the Spirit. The term “Last Days” describes the time period in between the first and second coming of Christ. The complete fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy is not taking place today but rather will take place during the millennial kingdom prior to the Second Coming of Christ. On the Day of Pentecost God was giving a preview of the power of the Spirit that will be released during the millennial kingdom. At that time God will pour out His Spirit on all mankind. This is also seen in the fact that there are many aspects of Joel’s prophecy (such as all the signs in the sky) that did not take place on the Day of Pentecost because they are associated with the great and glorious day of the Lord.

### **What about the usage of tongues in our private prayer lives?**

Some Christians believe that speaking in tongues is appropriate for their private times of prayer. They base this on Romans 8:26 which teaches us that when we do not know what to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. Is this speaking of praying in tongues? Nowhere does this text support that this is the Believer praying in a heavenly language. As we have already seen, the true gift of speaking in tongues was not speaking in ecstatic utterances but rather speaking in known human languages we have ever before learned. Romans 8:26 is teaching that in the times of our lives that our sorrow and weight is so deep that we don’t even know what to pray or don’t have the strength to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us, communicating the exact needs that we have to the Father. What about verses like Ephesians 6:18 which tells us to “pray in the Spirit?” Again, this is not a reference to praying in tongues. The gift of tongues ceased. To “pray in the Spirit” means to pray according to the will and leading of the Spirit of God in our lives.

## **If sign gifts such as speaking in tongues and healing are no longer for today, what are we to do when sickness comes into our lives as believers?**

As James wraps up his very practical book, he ends with the topic of sickness in James 5:13-20. He begins in by describing three circumstances of life. First, he speaks of those who are suffering (v13). The word for suffering used by James is broader than just physical sickness. It is also used referring to various other hardships (mental, emotional, etc.). It literally means “to suffer misfortune” as in the example of the imprisonment of Paul in 2 Timothy 2:9 or the example of Timothy’s hardships in ministry as seen in 2 Timothy 4:5. According to James, in these times of our lives, we are to pray

Second, James address the times in our lives when we are cheerful (v13). This is the contrast to the first example of suffering. This is when life is smooth. In these times we are to sing praise to God. James is driving home the point that whether we are suffering or cheerful, proper communion with God is needed in all of life’s situations.

Now James gets to his main point. He now speaks of those who are physically sick (v14-16). This is not a word describing minor sicknesses such as the flu or a cold. This word described a serious condition, one that was beyond human ability to treat. This word was used to describe the royal officer’s son who was about to die in John 4:46-47. It was used to describe Lazarus who shortly after did die in John 11:1-3, 6. It was used to describe Dorcas in Acts 9:37, who also died. And it was used to describe Epaphroditus who Paul described as being close to death (Philippians 2:26-27).

What are we to do when faith and life collide leaving us in a serious physical condition? James says that first we have a need to CALL (v14). It is the sick person who is to take the initiative to call for the Elders of the church. Notice that it is the church leaders who are called, not a person with special gifts of healing. The gift of healing was one of the sign gifts given to the early church to validate that the message of these Apostles was truly from God. As the Word of God became more and more complete, it, rather than signs gifts, became the validation that a message was truly from God (2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:3-4). The Elders are to anoint the sick person with oil and pray for them. This was not medicinal but rather a symbol of the Holy Spirit, James 4:5).

Second, James says that when we are in this type of sickness, we also have a need to CONFESS (v15-16a). According to James, the prayer offered in faith by the church leaders will restore the sick one and the Lord will raise him up. It is obvious from this passage that even without the gift of healing being active, God still does heal. However, it is very important to properly interpret Scripture with Scripture in this case and realize that our prayers being answered in this passage are conditional on our requests being in God’s will (1 John 5:4). It is obvious from Scripture that it is not always God’s will to heal. Paul had a thorn in the flesh which was most likely a physical ailment that God did not heal (2 Corinthians 12:7). Timothy had a stomach problem that was not healed (1 Timothy 5:23). On one of Paul’s journeys he had to leave Trophimus in the city of Miletus sick (2 Timothy 4:20). He did not simply heal Trophimus and bring him along on the trip.

Consider lessons that we can learn from the miracle of healing seen in Acts 3:1-10 involving Peter and John. They came across a man who was lame from birth (over 40 years...Acts 4:22). He was taken daily to the gate to beg for alms. It was the 9<sup>th</sup> hour (3pm) which was the busiest time at the temple where people came to give. He was not part of the early church at this time. As you read the book of Acts you will find that healing in Acts almost always occurs to the crowd, not the church.

This man is asking for alms with no thought of being healed. This tells me that, contrary to much popular teaching today, healing is not based solely on our faith, but it is always based on the sovereignty of God. The Apostles have no money to give this lame man. Instead, they command him to walk in the name of Jesus. He not only gets strength in his legs, but he receives perfect coordination. This shows us that healing in the Bible was instantaneous and complete. Progressive healing is not seen in the book of Acts.

Let me emphasize again that healing in the book of Acts was not based solely on the power of an individual or the faith of a sick person, but rather on the sovereignty of God. In the story of the lame man in Acts 3, we see the sovereignty of God in two ways. First, Jesus would have without doubt walked past this same lame man numerous times on His way in and out of the temple but He never chose to heal him. Second, though many other people with infirmities would have been present that day when the Apostles healed this man, no other beggar is recorded as also being healed. Divine healing is based on the sovereignty of God.

Back to James 5, James now makes a specific connection between the sickness and sin. He states that if the sick person has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. Since we all have sinned, this must refer to a specific sin which has caused the illness. Please understand that all illness is not due to sin, but some can be. In the Jewish mind of that day it was believed, as it is in many circles today, that all sickness was due to sin. You see this in John 9 in the question of the disciples when they passed the man born blind and asked Jesus who sinned, the blind man or his parents resulting in his being born without vision. Remember Jesus' answer. He said that neither the blind man nor his parents sinned but rather he was born with this infirmity so that God would be glorified. James is speaking in this passage of sickness that is the result of sin. He says that if the illness is due to sin and prayer and confession takes place, God promises to heal and to forgive.

The bottom line to the whole passage is that of trust. When we are seriously ill we should call for the leaders of the church to anoint us and pray for us. When we are seriously ill we should examine our lives and confess any sin that God reveals to us. When we are seriously ill we should trust God's will. God will do one of three things and whatever it is that is His will can be trusted to be perfect in purpose and timing. He may choose to heal us. However, as in the case with Paul's thorn in the flesh, He may choose to give us the grace to endure the sickness. He also may use the sickness to take us home to heaven, which after all, is the ultimate healing.

## **Conclusion**

As you can see from the content of this paper, here at Grace Church we do not believe that the sign gifts of speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, miracles, or healing are gifts that are given by the Spirit to individual believers today. We believe that today, God uses His Word, not sign gifts, to validate His message. As a result, we do not practice or condone the practice of such gifts within our ministry.