



DIGGING DEEPER

WEEK 5

A Controversial Gift

So many factors shape our understanding of Scripture. Our religious upbringings and traditions, our exposure to different theological ideas and beliefs, and the views of those we respect can shape our reading of the Scriptures. Understandably, there are some passages and details that are highly disputed and debated among Christians.

The spiritual gift of tongues, which Paul references in chapters 12 and 14 of his First Letter to the Corinthians, is one example. Throughout church history there has been much controversy surrounding the gift of tongues, and not much has changed through the centuries in these disagreements. Today we still argue over what it means to speak in tongues, how this gift is to be used, and whether it is relevant in the modern era. There are essentially three major views, although there are variations of thought within them.

1. Cessationism. Those who hold this view believe the gift of tongues has ceased. People in this camp tend to associate the gift with the supernatural ability to speak authentic foreign languages. They believe that, as in Acts 2 when the people gathered on Pentecost heard the gospel in their own languages, the spiritual gift of tongues has to do with the ability to speak real languages rather than ecstatic utterances (unintelligible sounds). Some of the ideas within this view include the following:

- The early church fathers seemed to de-emphasize the gift of tongues. Irenaeus, Chrysostom, Augustine, and Tertullian wrote and taught extensively but gave little floor time to this spiritual gift.
- The gift of tongues related to actual foreign languages that God enabled people to speak. New Testament believers spoke a variety of languages. In Corinth there were people from many different places, such as Aquila and Priscilla who were deported from Italy to Corinth during a time of persecution

of the Jews. Christians also faced persecution and moved often during the Diaspora—a time when the believers were scattered abroad. James wrote his book of the Bible to those dispersed believers (see James 1:1).

- Some cessationists hold to a dispensational view, identifying God as working in different ways during different time periods. They believe the gift was active during what is called the Apostolic Age—when the gospel was authenticated through supernatural outward expressions such as tongues. Some cite 1 Corinthians 13:10, which speaks of a time of perfection to come, as a reference to the finished canon of Scripture: “But when the time of perfection comes, these partial things will become useless.” They believe that when the Bible was complete, “sign gifts” such as tongues were no longer needed; and so in the dispensation of the Church Age, in which we currently live, tongues are no longer in use. Some say that the decline of the gift of tongues in early church history supports this view.

2. Charismaticism. In this view, the gift of tongues is seen as a high-profile gift associated with what is called the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Charismatics believe that spiritual maturity and speaking in tongues go hand in hand. They see the gift of tongues as something that can be learned and practiced by anyone seeking it. Some of the ideas within this view include the following:

- Tongues accompanied the coming of the Holy Spirit in several instances recorded in the New Testament, including the Day of Pentecost, the salvation of Cornelius’s household, and the baptism of some believers in Ephesus (see Acts 2:1-4; 10:45-46; 19:1-7).
- Tongues are a spiritual language (either ecstatic utterances or an actual unknown language) that is spoken publicly with interpretation for the edification of the church or privately without interpretation for the encouragement of the individual.
- Paul’s comments in 1 Corinthians 14 validate that speaking in tongues can be a private religious experience all believers should seek. Paul said that he wished everyone spoke in tongues (14:5) and that the church was not to forbid speaking in tongues (14:39).

3. Continuationism. Those who hold this view believe that all spiritual gifts continue to be in use today but that we should be careful to practice them according to the Scriptures. Some of the ideas within this view include the following:

- Opinions vary concerning whether the gift of tongues includes only authentic languages or ecstatic utterances as well.
- The gift of tongues is not associated with spiritual maturity, Holy Spirit baptism, or salvation. Not everyone has the gift of tongues because the Holy Spirit decides which gift(s) to give each person.

- To maintain order in the church, speaking in tongues publicly requires that biblical guidelines of interpretation are followed and no more than three speakers are permitted.

You may find yourself in one of these camps, somewhere in between, or unsure where you stand. No matter how you understand the disputable details regarding tongues, we can find unity in discussing these ideas with humility, respect, and the understanding that one day we will have a much clearer view. Until then, we are to show a watching world that although we do not see eye to eye on every topic, we can live love even when we disagree.

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