

Evaluating Spiritual Gifts

"My friends, you asked me about spiritual gifts," Paul wrote the Corinthian Christians ([1 Corinthians 12:1](#); quotes are from the Contemporary English Version, copyright 1991, American Bible Society).

"I want you to desire the best gifts" (verse 31).

The Corinthians desired spiritual gifts. Paul took this opportunity to emphasize the spiritual gifts that would best serve the entire community of believers. "If you really want spiritual gifts, choose the ones that will be most helpful to the church" ([1 Corinthians 14:12](#)).

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"Love should be your guide. Be eager to have the gifts that come from the Holy Spirit, especially the gift of prophecy.... When you prophesy [speak an inspired message — see *prophecy* in the glossary], you will be understood, and others will be helped" (verses 1, 3).

Purpose of Speaking: To Be Understood

Paul was giving the Christians in Corinth some guidance that they had asked for. He corrected a mistake they were making. They had been seeking the gift of tongues, but they were misusing the gift.

These tongues weren't helping the congregation. "If you speak languages that others don't know, God will understand what you are saying, though no one else will know what you mean.... By speaking languages that others don't know, you help only yourself" (verses 2, 4).

Paul said they didn't have to stop speaking in tongues (verse 39), but he did want them to turn their enthusiasm into more helpful channels, either by interpreting the unknown sounds, or simply by speaking words that could be understood.

"I am glad for you to speak unknown languages, although I had rather for you to prophesy. In fact, prophesying does much more good than speaking unknown languages, unless someone can help the church by explaining what you mean" (verse 5). "When we speak languages that others don't know, we should pray for the power to explain what we mean" (verse 13).

The most helpful gift is the gift of inspired speaking (verse 1). It can encourage, comfort and teach (verses 3, 31).

Meetings should be orderly

Paul also gave the Corinthians advice about a related concern: order in worship meetings. "My friends, when you meet to worship, you must do everything for the good of everyone there" (verse 26).

First, he gave instructions for people who spoke in tongues: "No more than two or three of you should speak.... You must take turns, and someone should always be there to explain what you mean. If no one can explain, you must keep silent in church" (verses 27-28).

Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The "gifts" of the Spirit are God-given abilities distributed as God knows is best for different aspects of Christian service. But not every Christian has the same gift, just as not every

part of the human body performs the function of seeing, hearing or walking ([1 Corinthians 12:14-26](#)). Through a division of labor, God encourages us to work with one another to be more efficient. As we work together, Christ gives his Church growth ([Ephesians 4:15-16](#)). What are the various gifts? Paul lists some in 1 Corinthians 12:28-30: Church leadership positions such as apostle, prophet and teacher, or gifts of miracles and healings, or less spectacular but equally necessary abilities such as helping others and administration.

Another list is in verses 7-10: messages of wisdom or knowledge, faith and healing and miracles, inspired messages of prophecy, tongues or interpretations, or a special gift for distinguishing between spirits. (The Greek word for "distinguishing" is also used in 14:29. This gift was probably used to tell which prophecies or tongue-interpretations were genuine and which were false.)

The precise difference between wisdom and knowledge, or faith and healing and miracles may not be important in this list; Paul is simply making the point that spiritual gifts come in many varieties, although they are all "for the common good."

[Romans 12:6-8](#) gives yet another list of gifts (none of the lists is exhaustive): prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving to others, leading others or showing mercy. Some of these service gifts should be found in all Christians, but some people are distinctly better at certain activities than other people are.

As God gives us these abilities, we should apply them as best we can for the common good of the Body of Christ.

The gifts in these lists come in three major categories: Church leadership, speaking, and serving others. Peter summarizes "gifts" under the categories of speaking and serving ([1 Peter 4:11](#)). "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms" (verse 10).

Paul said that God had given (the Greek verb is similar to the noun used for "gift") the Philippian Christians the ability to believe in Christ and also the opportunity to suffer for him ([Philippians 1:29-30](#)).

Suffering patiently and faithfully can also be a useful spiritual gift. Paul described a "thorn in my flesh" ([2 Corinthians 12:7](#)), which served by emphasizing Paul's weaknesses, therefore showing that the power of his message came not from himself but from God (verses 8-10).

Similar instructions were given for people who prophesied in language that could be understood: "Let only one person speak at a time, then all of you will learn something and be encouraged" (verse 31).

The Corinthians needed some advice about this; apparently their meetings had been full of confusion. "Suppose everyone in your worship service started speaking unknown languages, and some outsiders or some unbelievers come in. Won't they think you are crazy?" (verse 23).

Paul referred to marital status, whether married or not, as a gift ([1 Corinthians 7:7](#)). Any of life's circumstances can be considered a gift of God if we are able to use it to glorify Christ and serve others. It does not matter how spectacular or seemingly ordinary the gift is — what matters is how it is used ([1 Corinthians 13:1-4](#)). Love, a fruit of the Spirit that all Christians must have, is the test of whether an ability or gift is good. All gifts should be used to glorify Christ and to benefit others.

Paul was disappointed with how the Corinthian church meetings had been conducted. Earlier, Paul had scolded them because they had been arguing: "Your worship services do you more harm than good. I am certainly not going to praise you for this. I am told that you can't get along with each other when you worship.... You are bound to argue with each other" ([1 Corinthians 11:17-19](#)). So Paul stressed order. "God wants everything to be done peacefully and in order.... Do everything properly and in order" ([1 Corinthians 14:33, 40](#)).

Was it really the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit can inspire tongue-speaking, as Paul wrote in [1 Corinthians 12:7-11](#) and as we see in the book of Acts.

But tongue-speaking can happen in other ways, too. Non-Christians, both ancient and modern, have spoken in tongues. Several ancient religions included tongue-speaking, usually (as far as we can tell) not a real language, but simply strings of syllables, also called ecstatic speech:

There are records of ecstatic speech and the like in Egypt in the eleventh century B.C. In the hellenistic [Greek] world the prophetess of Delphi and the Sibylline priestess spoke in unknown or unintelligible speech. Moreover, the Dionysian rites contained a trancelike state as well as glossolalia. Many of the magicians and sorcerers of the first century world exhibit similar phenomena. (G.R. Osborne, in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1984, page 1100.)

Descriptions of ecstatic speech are common in the study of comparative religions.... The Delphic and Pythian religions of Greece understood ecstatic behavior and speech to be evidence of divine inspiration by Apollos. [C.M. Robeck, Jr., in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 4, 1988, page 872.]

How did these ancient pagans speak in tongues? Perhaps they were given supernatural abilities by demons, but perhaps they did it simply from human ability. Modern investigations have found that tongues — or at least something that sounds like tongues — can come from a natural source, the human brain:

The tongues phenomena can be explained on psychological, sociological, physiological and linguistic ground alone.... The consensus of most social scientists is that glossolalia (tongue-speaking) takes place when a person is functioning in some type of altered mental state....

...psychologists consider them [tongues] to be explainable in terms not necessarily supernatural or spiritual.... The psychological state of the glossalalist is altered in some way. (Klemet Preus, *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 46, 1982, pages 280-281.) Glossolalia is not language in the ordinary sense.... It is, rather, a willed and welcomed vocal event in which, in a context of attention to religious realities, the tongue operates within one's mood but apart from one's mind in a way comparable to the fantasy-languages of children.... Glossolalia is regularly both taught...and learned, and is in fact easy to do if one wants to. (J.I. Packer, *Churchman*, Vol. 94, 1980, pages 108-109.) Glossolalia is a learned skill, however unconscious its mechanism. The occasions on which it is manifest are to a high degree dependent upon expectations of a specific group, expressed in part through ritualized procedures. Even the characteristic bodily motions accompanying dissociation and some aspects of modulations in the utterances are specific to a particular group and even to the leader who has "taught" the glossolalist. And the

interpretation given to glossolalia depends upon the belief system of the group. (Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 1983, page 120.)

Ecstatic speech, although unusual, is a natural ability that can be taught. Tongue-speaking is not necessarily a miracle, so it cannot be proof of the Holy Spirit. The Corinthian Christians, however, had been assuming that tongue-speaking was proof of supernatural inspiration. From the way that Paul writes, we conclude that some of the Corinthians had a real spiritual gift for speaking in tongues.

However, others — the ones causing confusion — were imitating the gift. Perhaps influenced by the importance given to ecstatic sounds in pagan religions, some of the Corinthians emphasized tongue-speaking as a visible evidence of being spiritual. In doing so, they were neglecting the more important parts of Christianity, such as love.

Paul redirected their thoughts to help them see a better way. He started by reminding the Corinthians of their pagan past ([1 Corinthians 12:2](#)), and he gave an extreme example to show that not every saying is inspired by God (verse 3). Messages need to be examined before they can be accepted ([1 Corinthians 14:29](#), [1 Thessalonians 5:20-21](#)). God will not inspire a message that contradicts the Bible or the way of love.

Since the message needs to be evaluated, it has to be understood. That is why Paul says the gift of tongues, if there is no interpreter, is for private use ([1 Corinthians 14:28](#)), and that is why he emphasizes prophecy.

Understandable speaking is better than ecstatic sounds in several ways: It can be controlled and orderly, it can teach and edify both believers and unbelievers; and it is not noisy chaos. No one would confuse it with the ecstasy that occurred in groups who, for example, worshipped the wine god while drinking and making noise with musical instruments.

"Brothers, stop thinking like children" (verse 20). Paul did not mean that tongue-speaking was childish, but rather that the Corinthian overemphasis on tongues was childish. Paul quoted a passage from [Isaiah 28:11-12](#) to point out that speaking in strange tongues is not always an effective way to bring people to God.

Tongues are a sign "for unbelievers." People who don't yet believe in God look for miraculous proofs ([1 Corinthians 14:22](#)). But even if they see tongues, they may scoff, perhaps saying the people are drunk, crazy or even demon-inspired (verse 23, [Acts 2:13](#)).

Tongues, as a sign, do not lead people to the obedience and faith in Jesus our Lord. Christians, who already believe, need to look for the less spectacular but more important change in the human heart, a change Paul describes as the way of love.

Did Paul speak in tongues?

But didn't Paul himself speak in tongues? He says he did in [1 Corinthians 14:18](#), but we do not know what kind of tongues he spoke. He knew several languages, but this is probably not what he meant. He did not say he spoke in more languages; rather, he said he spoke in tongues more often than the Corinthians did. He could pray in a tongue, but he preferred to pray with understanding (verses 14-15).

Paul described many of his supernatural and natural experiences (2 Corinthians 12:1-5, 11:21-30), but he doesn't say anything more about tongues. Apparently it wasn't important for Christians then or now. From the instructions he gave the Corinthians, it is clear that Paul would not have spoken in a church meeting in a language that others could not understand (1 Corinthians 14:19).

Paul said that tongues could edify the speaker (verse 4), but the importance of self-edification is limited. After all, the Corinthians had been overestimating themselves in wisdom and knowledge and spirituality; they were puffed up with self-importance. They did not need more attention on self — for spiritual maturity, they needed to exercise love for others, and build up the church, not themselves (verses 3-4).

What did Paul mean when he wrote, "I would like every one of you to speak in tongues" (verse 5)? Perhaps he wished that all the Corinthians were really speaking messages from God. Whatever he meant, he immediately clarified that his greater desire was that the Christians speak in a way that

could be understood: "I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified."

The Corinthian experience with tongue-speaking seems to have been an isolated case, and Paul dealt with it in a tactful, instructive way. He allowed a limited amount of tongue-speaking, but he did not allow it in church meetings if there was no interpretation. He did not allow several people to speak at once (verses 27-28). He clearly said that orderly, understandable messages were better.

But if a person wanted to speak in an unknown tongue at home, in private, the Church should allow it (verse 39). The unusual speech might encourage people to continue building their relationship with God. At least it would be a reminder that we are not always able to clearly describe our needs ([Romans 8:26](#)).

Summary

Does speaking in tongues prove that the Holy Spirit has come to a person? No. Gifts or abilities, no matter how miraculous they appear, should not automatically be accepted as divine. They should be tested to see whether they are in harmony with God's Word and the Christian way of life.

Are those who speak in tongues more spiritual or closer to God than those who do not? Not necessarily. If those who speak in tongues don't have love, Paul says, they are useless noisemakers — no matter what language they speak (1 Corinthians 13:1).

What role should tongue-speaking have in the Church? Paul does not forbid tongue-speaking, but he strictly limits its role in the meetings of the Church. He tells the Corinthians not to do it during their meetings unless someone could interpret. Even if interpreters are there, only one person should speak at a time.

The gift of tongues, or any other gift, is not a special mark of spirituality. All the gifts of the Spirit are given as God decides ([1 Corinthians 12:11](#)). As we follow the example given in the book of Acts, we do not need to make special effort to experience this particular gift. (See "Seeking the Gift of Tongues," page 6.) No one, no matter what gifts one has, has any reason to be proud or to look down on others (verses 21-25). And Christians with "small" gifts need not feel bad. Each should simply use his or her abilities to best serve others ([Romans 12:6-13](#)).

Fruit of the Holy Spirit

"Live by the Spirit," Paul tells us in [Galatians 5:16](#), not by the "desires of the sinful nature." These phrases represent opposite approaches to life (verse 17). In verses 19-21, Paul describes some of the acts of the sinful nature, and in verses 22-23 he describes some of the fruit or results of the Holy Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

In [Ephesians 5:9](#), Paul describes more "fruit" of the Christian life: "goodness, righteousness and truth." The Holy Spirit also produces life and peace ([Romans 8:6](#)), hope ([Romans 15:13](#)) and spiritual wisdom (1 Corinthians 2:6-15). All Christians should have all these qualities. As we yield to God's Spirit ([Romans 8:13-14](#)), and as we are led by the Spirit of Christ (verse 9), we will have Jesus Christ's mercy and compassion for others and his love for God's way of life.

"By their fruit you will recognize them," said Jesus ([Matthew 7:20](#)). Many people will call Jesus "Lord," and they will prophesy and perform miracles in his name (verses 21-22), but unless they do the will of the Father, they are false prophets (verses 21, 15). "By their fruit [by the way they live] you will recognize them" (verse 16). All Christians should have the fruit of God's Spirit.

Glossary

Caesarea. A city about 80 miles northwest of Jerusalem, where the Holy Spirit came upon the gentile Cornelius and his household.

Charismatics. Those of various denominations who emphasize spiritual gifts such as tongue-speaking, healing or prophecy. They usually do not teach that everyone should have the same gift. The Greek word *charismata* means "gifts."

Ecstatic speech. Non-language syllables produced when the brain sends signals to the organs of speech (throat, tongue and lips) but the language center of the brain does not organize the signals. The person can be conscious or in a trancelike state.

Ephesus. A city in western Asia Minor, near modern Izmir in western Turkey. The miraculous tongue-speaking at Ephesus showed that disciples of John the Baptist were accepted into Christian churches after faith, baptism and the laying on of hands.

Glossolalia. Speaking in tongues. The Greek word *glossa* means "tongue," and *laleo* means "speak."

John the Baptist. A Jewish prophet who prepared the way for Jesus. He had many disciples even 20 years after his death.

Mark 16:15-18. Modern translations note that verses 9-20 are not in some of the oldest New Testament manuscripts and therefore may not be part of the original Gospel. We include these verses in our discussion, but they do not affect our conclusion.

Pentecost. One of the annual religious festivals God told the Israelites to observe. It comes about seven weeks after Passover. It was on Pentecost that the Holy Spirit filled the disciples, causing them to speak in tongues, and the New Testament Church was founded.

Pentecostalism. A movement that stresses the importance of tongue-speaking as a "second blessing." People are taught that they receive the Holy Spirit upon conversion, but are not filled with or baptized with the Holy Spirit until they speak in tongues.

Prophecy. A God-inspired saying or a message from God. The verb translated "prophecy" means to speak under divine inspiration, with or without referring to future events.

Samaria. A region about 40 miles north of Jerusalem. The Samaritan people were of mixed ancestry, both Israelite and gentile. When the gospel was preached in Samaria, the Holy Spirit came upon converts in some noticeable way, but there is no mention of tongues ([Acts 8:14-18](#)).

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