

# Hartford Bible Students Newsletter

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### Speaking in Tongues: Then and Now

The early Church clearly benefited from the gifts of the Spirit that were bestowed upon them — speaking in tongues, healings, etc. These gifts were a miraculous sign for unbelievers and an evidence that these early Christian disciples were truly the messengers of God. But at this time, the far end of the Gospel Age, is the Lord still using these methods to establish his Church? Are gifts still a mark of one's spirituality and a validation of one's acceptance by God? This subject is one that is worthy of careful examination.

### Speaking in Tongues

At the time of Jesus' ministry, believers lived primarily in Judea and surrounding areas. This was because, during Jesus' ministry, he had instructed his disciples to send forth his message of salvation only to the Jews. *"These twelve [Apostles] Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."* (Matthew 10:5, 6) However, the Apostles were later instructed, *"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations... [not just the Jews]."* (Matthew 28:19)

How could this be accomplished by "unlearned men" who spoke the Aramaic language? God's answer was to provide the gift of His holy Spirit which would allow Jesus' followers to speak in foreign languages for the purpose of teaching salvation through Christ. Vine's Expository Dictionary explains that speaking in tongues was: *"The supernatural gift of speaking in another language without its having been learned."*

On the Day of Pentecost, ten days after Jesus' ascension, Jews gathered to Jerusalem from many surrounding nations for the purpose of keeping their holy day. At this same time, Jesus' followers, Jews who had accepted Christ, were assembled together according to his command that they *"should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father... John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the holy Ghost [Spirit] not many days hence."* (Acts 1:4,5)

As promised, the waiting disciples were baptized with the holy Spirit. *"And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind... And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they... began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.... Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?"* (Acts 2:1-8)

This significant event was indelibly marked in history by the miracle of tongues which accompanied the receiving of the holy Spirit. As a result, the Jews from many foreign lands who gathered at Jerusalem for the holy days heard the Gospel preached in their own language or tongue.

## **Spiritual Gifts: A Foundation for the Early Church**

In Romans 1:11, the Apostle Paul stated clearly the purpose of spiritual gifts given to the early Church: *“That I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established.”* Note the phrase *“to the end ye may be established.”* Miraculous gifts were necessary at this critical juncture to establish the faith of the early Church, described by the Apostle Paul as a child: *“Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.”* 1 Corinthians 13:8-11) As a child, the infant Church required special gifts for the purpose of witnessing the Gospel message beyond the immediate region of Jerusalem.

Keep in mind that the New Testament as we have it today had not yet been given, but when the Apostles left their inspired writings to be shared with all of the congregations, these became sufficient to establish faith, *“that the man of God may be thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”* (2 Timothy 3:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:27) When the canon of New Testament Scripture became available to the growing Church, there was no longer a need for special gifts.

Consider again the statement: *“Tongues shall cease.”* While Christ walked among them, the Apostles and seventy chosen men were provided miraculous powers, but these men were not given the ability to pass these gifts on to others. (Luke 10:1-20) At the time of Pentecost, however, after Jesus had died and was raised again from the dead, there was a change in the operation of the holy Spirit. Only the eleven faithful Apostles, Judas having been lost, were given the special ability to pass these miraculous gifts on to others. So with the death of the Apostles, including Paul as Judas’ replacement, this ability to impart gifts passed away.

### **“Speaking into the Air”**

The Apostle Paul started to see the need to warn some in the Corinthian Church against prideful behavior in the use of their gifts. Paul reminded them that the purpose of tongues was to witness the Gospel to unbelievers and not to bring glory or attention to oneself: *“...except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air... Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian... in the Church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue. Brethren, be not children in understanding... Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not.”* (1 Corinthians 14:9-22)

Note here the word “sign.” The Apostle was pointing out that speaking with tongues was merely for a sign so that the attention of unbelievers might be drawn to their message. Again, when the Apostles fell asleep in death, and Churches began to be established on the solid ground of their writings, there was no more need for a sign to lead men to Christ.

This temptation on the part of the Corinthian Church to misuse the spiritual gifts led to spiritual pride, confusion and a poor witness. The Apostle Paul had to lay down strict guidelines in the use of tongues. *“If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret. But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the Church...”* (1 Corinthians

14:27, 28)

Paul was emphasizing that the use of gifts was not a sign to believers, but used as a witness to unbelievers from foreign countries so that they might hear the Word of God spoken clearly in their own native language. If not for this purpose, it was best to keep silent.

### **“Covet Earnestly The Best Gifts”**

The gifts of the Spirit, therefore, which were highly esteemed in the early Church, were but a stepping stone to something far more valuable and lasting. The Apostle called this “a more excellent way.” (1 Corinthians 12:31) He encouraged the Church to progress forward from these miraculous gifts of the Spirit toward developing the fruits of the Spirit by a knowledge and appreciation of God’s character and plan. All spiritual gifts were to be identified as of the holy influence of God, and the one true object of God’s Spirit, His holy influence working in the life of the Christian, is to develop in each His beautiful character of love. This character attribute envelops every fruit and grace of the Spirit. These fruits of the Spirit are designated by the Apostle to be “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance.” (Galatians 5:22, 23)

The word “fruit,” it will be noticed, conveys a double thought — it is a gift, but of gradual development in maturity — the result of labor. These fruits grow in proportion as we come into harmony in thought, word and deed to God’s will and plan as illustrated in His Word. The Christian’s goal, therefore, should be to develop the fruits of the holy Spirit in likeness to God’s dear Son.

Yes, the miraculous diversity of tongues and the incredible gift to heal the sick had the practical purpose of spreading the Gospel quickly and efficiently to peoples of other languages, but, as these gifts ceased, emphasis was then placed upon the development of a strong moral and ethical character (fruitage) built upon the knowledge of the truth. *“And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ; Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.”* Philippians 1:9-11

Personally developed gifts, then, are to be esteemed more highly than miraculously bestowed gifts given only to the early Church. The Apostle declared: *“I show unto you a more excellent way;” “follow after love and desire [cultivate] spiritual gifts...”* (1 Corinthians 12:31; 14:1)

**Hartford Bible Students \* P.O. Box 493 \* Manchester, CT 06045**