

THE HOLY SPIRIT

LESSON 9: PRAYING IN TONGUES AND THE GIFT OF TONGUES

Main Idea: The Holy Spirit is a **person**, not a doctrine or a debate. The Holy Spirit is a person with whom you need to develop a relationship. Some people's relationship is hindered because they believe the issue of spiritual language is confusing. The reason for the confusion is usually due to fear and/or church traditions. But Scripture declares, "God is not a God of confusion" (1 Corinthians 14:33) What that means is that if there is any confusion about the subject, it is not of God. This lesson looks at what Scripture says about the Baptism in Holy Spirit. As you study, ask God to help you understand what His Word is saying to you.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12-14





SIGHTLINE: Acquire Your Target

What did the Scripture mean to the original author and audience? As you explore information on the author, content, culture, history, land, and language of the Bible, you will gain a better understanding of the intended message of God's Word.

An often-debated passage of Scripture regarding prayer language is 1 Corinthians 12-14. The debate is between praying in tongues as a sign of the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the gifts of tongues which is for public use in a worship service.

Before we explore the debate further, it's essential to be aware of the danger of **proof texting**—using a single line of Scripture to prove an argument without considering the context or full meaning. However, this study is built on the hermeneutical principle that Scripture interprets Scripture. If you're going to understand a Scripture, doctrine, or issue, more than one passage of Scripture is needed to define your understanding. In fact, the whole of Scripture defines your understanding because all Scripture is given to you to help you understand who God is and what He wants you to do. This means you have to be a diligent Bible student to have an accurate understanding of the Holy Spirit.

Here's some background context to this passage in 1 Corinthians. The church at Corinth was being undermined by immorality and spiritual immaturity. In fact, Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to correct the church's many errors. Some were **abusing the Lord's supper** (like it was dinner, no reverence, no confession of sin); some were involved in **sexual immorality** in the church (even leaders in the church); and some were **abusing the spiritual gifts** in public services.

At Corinth, instead of the gifts building up and unifying the church, they were splitting it. Today, when gifts are abused in the church, it can cause similar trouble. This may be why so many churches avoid the gifts altogether. But in 1 Corinthians 12-14, Paul provides specific information and rules for the **gift of tongues in corporate worship**.

For the most part, these chapters do **not** address tongues as a prayer language, which everybody receives as part of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Paul addresses private prayer language only once in 1 Corinthians 12-14. To



teach otherwise, one would have to totally ignore the context of what Paul is saying. Furthermore, the book of Acts clearly shows speaking in tongues as the sign for those receiving the baptism in the Holy Spirit. These chapters primarily deal with the spiritual gift of tongues (public use of tongues). In Paul's day, spiritual gifts had become symbols of spiritual power. People believed that if they had these gifts, they were more spiritual than those who did not.

The church at Corinth was spiritually immature, and Paul sharply corrected them. You see, when we do not understand what the Word of God teaches, we tend to do what we **feel** is correct. But your relationship with the Holy Spirit should go beyond what you **feel**. This is why Paul addresses the believer's right attitude and right method of the public use of tongues.

Paul describes the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12:1, 8-11. Take a moment to read these verses. From the verses you just read, one can deduce that Paul was referring to the public use of tongues. The moment it requires interpretation at a gathering of believers, tongues has ceased to be a private prayer language and crossed into the realm of the spiritual gifts. Paul quickly adds that not all receive this gift of public speaking in tongues with interpretation, telling the church in verse 11, "All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually **as he wills.**" Paul is saying the believer does not get to pick which gift they want because that decision is up to the Holy Spirit.

Paul is clear in 1 Corinthians 12:28-31:

And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

Remember, that tongues in this passage is referring to the spiritual gift. As a believer, you should earnestly seek all of the gifts, but ultimately the Holy Spirit decides which gift is needed at the moment.

Unfortunately, the verses above have been used as a proof text to argue that not every believer has to speak with tongues when they are Spirit filled. But honest students of the Bible will ask, "Was Paul speaking about tongues as a gift in a public service or as a personal prayer language?" Based on the



context of the entire chapter, Paul is addressing the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues in a public service. Paul's notion is clear that not everyone who speaks in tongues in a prayer language has the spiritual gift of speaking out in a public service.

In the Corinthian church, errors and abuses were taking place. Some taught that everyone had the public gift of speaking in tongues. As a result of this teaching, there was confusion. Paul's point was that in the same way not everyone is an apostle or worker of miracles, not everyone will have the privilege of being used to speak out in tongues in a public service for the purpose of interpretation.

Another passage some have used to teach that the gifts have ceased is 1 Corinthians 13:1 and 8 that says,

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal . . . Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.”

Again, one needs to look at the context to determine whether Paul was referencing praying in tongues or the gift of tongues. It appears the context is about the gift of tongues because the passage also mentions prophecy, another public gift.

1 Corinthians 13, also known as “the love chapter,” may be one of the most common Bible passages to be taken out of context, often at weddings. Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. Here, Paul is not actually talking about romantic love. He is speaking about the *agape* type of love, out of which the other types of love, including romantic love, should come. The problem with the church of Corinth is they did not practice *agape* love. Instead, the church was measuring their spirituality by the spiritual gifts that flowed in the church and out of their life. The people were being prideful, haughty, selfish, and cutting each other off to be heard in the public service. Paul admonished them that their expressions really do not amount to much. In other words, if you do not have a 1 Corinthians 13 love, your Acts 2 experience is worthless. It is not one or the other, it is both. God wanted the Corinthian church to have the gifts of the Spirit, but more importantly, He wanted them to walk in love.

If God is the source of all the gifts of the Spirit, then love is the source. In fact, the first word Paul uses when he discusses the fruit of the spirit is love. It would probably be safe to assume he placed more importance on the fruit of



the Spirit than the gifts. It stands to reason that love should be the motivation for the use of all of these gifts. A spiritual gift is a tool from God; it is up to you to decide how you will use it.

God loves you enough to heal you, to give you a prophetic word, or to give you a word of wisdom when needed. To remove the love of God from these gifts causes confusion, chaos, and trouble. Often, Pentecostal churches measure themselves by how many messages in tongues are given in their services. But Paul gives a different measurement—love.

The only time Paul spoke about praying in tongues for private devotions in these chapters is in 1 Corinthians 14:18–19 where he wrote, “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.” You can know this is true because in verse 19, Paul says “in the church.” This would imply that in verse 18, Paul is at least implying the inclusion of tongues in private prayer.

Another question to ask is, “How many of the believers in the Corinthian church spoke in tongues in private prayer? From verse 18, the implication is that every one of them had received the baptism in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in other tongues.

The problem in the Corinthian church was not that they were speaking in tongues. The problem was that they were abusing spiritual language and spiritual gifts in the church. Paul made the shift between verse 18 and 19 from devotional tongues to the gift of tongues in the church. Remember, the context of these verses was the Corinthians’ pride in their ability to speak with tongues, to the point of loudly interrupting the pastor, bishop, or overseer as they preached God’s Word. In fact, this spiritual gift dominated the whole service.

The public gift of tongues has a purpose: to be a sign to unbelievers. The only reason for speaking out in tongues in a public service is to be a sign to people who do not believe in Christ, to grab their attention. Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 14:21–23:

“In the Law it is written, ‘By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.’ Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers



enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds?”

Here Paul is once again referencing the **spiritual gift** of tongues. From these texts, some people teach that the believer today should not speak in tongues at all in church because doing so would confuse unbelievers. However, that is opposite of what Paul taught. Paul taught that the gift of tongues was to grab the attention of unbelievers. So, if God put this gift in the church to be a sign to unbelievers, why would you hide it from them? In the Old Testament, when the people heard the sound of a foreign tongue, it was a sign to the people that you better pay attention because judgment is coming. Could this be the same in the church today that when someone speaks in a foreign tongue, God is trying to get someone’s attention?

The Scriptures are clear that while there is a similarity between the two manifestations of *glossalalia*—same Greek word is used to describe both the public gift and the prayer language—there is a difference in purpose and use. When individuals were baptized in the Holy Spirit, tongues were always present as the initial physical evidence to both the individual being baptized and others present. No interpretation was given in those instances because the primary purpose of the tongues had been accomplished—as the sign the Holy Spirit had been received. There is no indication that the Early Church leaders involved in these outpourings expected interpretation, or that they saw this as the imparting of the public gift of tongues.

Remember from Acts, on the Day of Pentecost, all one-hundred and twenty from the Upper Room spoke with tongues when they were baptized in the Holy Spirit. At the outpouring in Caesarea (Acts 10:46), people spoke in tongues simultaneously. At the outpouring in Ephesus (Acts 19:6), twelve received the Holy Spirit and spoke with tongues. Carl Brumback adds,

If all speaking with tongues is the gift of the Holy Spirit, then all these believers, apostles included, were out of order. How are we to explain this contradiction between apostolic instruction in 1 Corinthians and the practices of the book of Acts unless we make a distinction between speaking in tongues as a sign of the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the public speaking in tongues with interpretation as a spiritual gift. Certainly, the Holy Spirit would not inspire and give utterance in Acts and then inspire Paul to condemn it in 1 Corinthians.¹

Upon examination of the entirety of Scripture, one discovers to speak

¹ Carl Brumback, *Tongues, Rescinded or Rejected? A Scholarly and Biblical Exposition* (Ravenhill Publishing, 2013).



in tongues in a public service is indeed permitted. Remember, Scripture interprets Scripture. A decision has to be made whether or not Paul is teaching about devotional tongues or the spiritual gift of tongues. Still, in the context of the public meeting, one must conclude that Paul is talking about the **spiritual gift** of tongues. Read what Paul asserts about this spiritual gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians 14:24–28:

But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.

What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God.

Paul provided 1 Corinthians 12–14 to the Corinthian church to keep things in order and prevent chaos in the church. If someone speaks in tongues as a gift of the Spirit in church, Paul admonishes that there should be two or three at most. However, if there is no interpreter, the one who has the gift of tongues should keep quiet and pray in the Spirit to themselves. Paul says to remain silent if there is no interpreter because it does no good for someone to interrupt a service with a tongue if there is no interpretation.

Unfortunately, we tend to throw the baby out with the bathwater. If today's church has problems with the gifts of the Spirit, some contend that there should not be any gifts that operate in the church. But Paul warned the Corinthian church not to go to extremes and stop people from speaking in tongues. This admonition from Paul also references the gift of tongues. 1 Corinthians 14:39–40 says, "So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But all things should be done decently and in order." None of these instructions have to do with private prayer language but rather with the public display of spiritual gifts. Paul taught **do not forbid to speak with tongues**. Sadly, many of today's churches have done exactly what Paul warned the Corinthian church not to do.





CROSSHAIR: Focus on Your Target

What does this study say to you? Through studying the biblical explanations and principles in this study below, you will better understand what God is saying to you today.

In 1 Corinthians 12-14, Paul deals almost exclusively with information and rules about governing tongues as a **gift of the Spirit and its use in public services**. Consider this table for a quick, helpful look at the difference between the initial physical evidence and the gift of tongues.

Praying in tongues (The initial physical evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit)	Summary Concept (One of nine gifts)
It serves as a sign to believers that they have received the baptism in the Holy Spirit.	It serves as a sign to unbelievers.
It is praise from the individual to God.	It's a gift from God to the Church.
It builds up the believer.	Not all receive this gift.
Does not require interpretation	It edifies those who hear.
It's a personal prayer language to God.	It is a message from God to the Church.
All who receive the Baptism speak in these tongues.	It requires interpretation.
	It is to be used in corporate worship according to Scriptural guidelines.



BULLSEYE: Zero in on Your Target

How can this study apply to your life? By listening to the Holy Spirit's leading as you answer this series of questions, you can gain useful insights that will help you apply the truth of God's Word to your daily life.

Write down your answer to the following questions here or in your journal:

- Who appears in the passages you read?
- Where are these passages taking place?
- When are these passages occurring?
- Why are these passages important?
- What is happening in these passages?
- What verse stood out to you? Why?



- What are three problems Paul addressed in the Corinthian church? What can you learn about problems in the church?

- Describe in your own words your understanding between praying in tongues and tongues as a gift of the Spirit.

- On a scale of one to four, with one being often and four being never/rarely, how often do you see the gifts of the Holy Spirit operating in your life? How can you improve their operation in your life?

- What makes tongues a spiritual gift?

- Why do you think walking in the love Paul described in 1 Corinthians 13 is essential as the gifts of the Holy Spirit operate through you and other believers?



USING MY FIREBIBLE

Read the study notes for the following verses in the *FireBible* and answer the accompanying questions:

- 1 Corinthians 12:1. Describe in your own words the four purposes of spiritual gifts.
- 1 Corinthians 12:1-6. How do the five terms the Bible uses for spiritual gifts help you gain insight about their nature and purpose?
- 1 Corinthians 12:25. Describe why spiritual gifts should be considered in the church.
- 1 Corinthians 13:1. What is the main motivation for spiritual gifts? Why do you think Paul described this as the “more excellent way?”



- 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. On a scale of one to four, with one being very often and four being rarely, rate yourself on how often you display love as an activity and behavior. Why do you think you do this? Write out a plan to improve in this area.

- 1 Corinthians 13:13. Why does God honor Christlike character more than spiritual gifts?

- 1 Corinthians 14:2. Why did Paul write this chapter? Write down in your own words your outline for chapter 14.

- 1 Corinthians 14:15. Describe your Spirit baptism journey. How does praying in tongues devotionally impact your spiritual development? How can you improve in this area?



- 1 Corinthians 14:27. What are the guiding principles for the use of spiritual gifts in the church?

- Read the *FireBible* article “Spiritual Gifts for Believers.” Write in your own words the four general perspectives on the gifts of the Holy Spirit given to believers.





TRIGGER PULL: Hit Your Target

How does this study affect your relationship with God and others? You experience God's Word in action as you use it to direct your journey with Him and those around you. Answer the following questions and record the answers below or in your journal.

- Take some time to listen to the Lord about what you just studied. How did this study help deepen your love for God?

- Write down a thought from this study that you experienced this week.

- As a result of your deepened love for God, how can you practically demonstrate the thought you experienced to your family and to others around you?

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®)
Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

