



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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The Sound of Silence

In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 we find these words: “Women should be silent during the church meetings. It is not proper for them to speak. They should be submissive, just as the law says. If they have any questions, they should ask their husbands at home, for it is improper for women to speak in church meetings.”

These statements, sandwiched in the middle of a chapter about speaking in tongues and order in the church, can be confusing to us as modern women. In other writings Paul clearly has said that men and women are equal in Christ. To the church at Galatia he writes, “There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). So why this instruction to be silent when the church gathers?

There are three main views among Christians regarding the interpretation and application of these verses.

1. **The instruction for women to be silent in the church was related to the cultural conditions of the original audience.** This view tends to be the most commonly held view in church practice today. Similar to Paul’s instruction for women to cover their heads, this instruction for women to be silent had some cultural “wrapping” attached to a specific issue related to the overarching principle of order in the church. The focus was on maintaining clarity and order rather than keeping women from participating in worship.
2. **Women can speak but should not teach in the church.** Proponents of this view believe Paul was referring to teaching when he spoke of the silence of women. They cite 1 Timothy 2:12 for scriptural support: “I do not let women teach men or have authority over them. Let them listen quietly.”

Some who take this stance do not allow women to teach at all while others permit women to teach children or other women but not audiences of mixed genders.

3. **Women should be completely silent in the church.** Those who hold this stance do not see any culture wrapped in this verse but consider it a binding instruction. Though few traditions hold strictly to this view today, I know a family who left a church because women were allowed to pray and make announcements.

To understand the first view, we must explore the cultural context. It is significant that Paul raises this issue in the midst of reprimanding the church at Corinth for their lack of order. What was going on here?

Christianity brought liberation and hope to women of that time who were considered second-class citizens and did not have access to education. Jesus talked to women freely, which was unheard of in Jewish culture, and encouraged them to learn and grow in knowledge. He told Martha that Mary had chosen the better part in sitting at his feet and listening (Luke 10:42).

Throughout the New Testament we see women in the early church leading and exercising their spiritual gifts:

- Phoebe was a deacon in the church who was called worthy of honor and helpful to many. (Romans 16:1-2)
- Priscilla was a co-worker in Paul's ministry who once risked her life on his behalf. (Romans 16:3-4)
- Junia was a fellow Jew who suffered in prison with Paul and was highly respected among the apostles (though there is some debate about whether or not Junia was female or male). (Romans 16:7)
- Euodia and Syntyche were women who worked hard in telling others the good news. (Philippians 4:2-3)

We also read in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 that women could pray and prophesy with their heads covered. Knowing the freedom that Christianity brought to women makes this passage about women being silent in church puzzling.

Our responsibility in studying the Bible is to recognize tensions and make theologically informed decisions. When we look at the whole of Scripture, we see that gifts are given to all—women and men alike. In reality, few churches today could say that they follow a literal interpretation of Paul's mandate. In many churches women are doing much in the areas of leading, teaching, and missions. And in most churches women welcome guests, make announcements, pray, or share testimonies of what God has done.

Although Paul instructed women to be silent and ask their questions at home, we must be careful to unwrap the cultural implications of the original audience so that we do not get caught up in the letter rather than the spirit of the law. The question we should ask is "What is God's heart in this?"

- One plausible explanation some scholars have suggested is that women in the early church were liberated to learn but still had a long way to go in their knowledge and understanding. In their immaturity, they may have been interrupting the order of church meetings with questions that were valid yet so elementary that they were disruptive. We might liken it to individuals asking rudimentary questions in a budget meeting; they need time to learn and grow—to grasp more difficult concepts—so that their basic but legitimate questions do not slow the progress of the meeting. One commentator said it this way: “Perhaps the largely uneducated women of that day were interrupting proceedings with irrelevant questions that would be better dealt with in their homes.”¹

While Christians may disagree about the interpretation and application of these verses about women being silent in the church, we can live love even in the midst of opposing views. Each of us must make our own decisions about how to understand the biblical text and find a local body of believers where we can serve in the way we feel called and equipped.

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1. Craig L. Blomberg, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 292.

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