

PLAIN SPEECH ON THE GIFT OF TONGUES

The gift of tongues may strike you as something weird and wrong that only out of control fanatics want to force on everyone else. Bring up tongues, and the questions fly! "Just what is the gift of tongues?" "What is its purpose anyway?" "Didn't it occur once and for all back in the Bible?" "It's not for ME, today is it?"

TONGUES AS A SIGN OF THE SPIRIT'S COMING

In his Pentecost account in the Acts of the Apostles, St. Luke describes the first of these: *"All were filled with the Holy Spirit. They began to express themselves in foreign tongues and make bold proclamation as the Spirit prompted them."* (Ac 2:4) The people in the crowd were puzzled; *"because each one heard these men speaking in his/her own language."* (Ac 2:6) Here the Holy Spirit is empowering the 120 to speak intelligible languages they had never learned. It was a miracle designed to alert the people to the arrival of the Paraclete and to make them eager to listen to St. Peter's explanation. It was also a symbol of the worldwide destiny of the Gospel and the brotherhood of all races and nations in Jesus.

TONGUES AS A FORM OF PRAYER

Tongues can also be a prayer: *"A man who speaks in a tongue is talking not to men but to God. No one understands him because he utters mysteries in the Spirit."* (1 Cor 14:2) *"Talking to God"* is another way of saying "prayer." Notice that in this case the language does not appear to be an intelligible one. St. Paul gives some characteristics of this type of prayer. Even though the one praying does not understand the words he utters (1 Cor 14:2, 13), nevertheless this activity does him good (1 Cor. 14:4). It is a kind of prayer that leaves the intellect in neutral (1 Cor 14:14) thus allowing for deeper levels of the human spirit to express things to God. Since it is true prayer that strengthens the individual, St. Paul is thankful that he speaks in tongues, and he wants everyone to have the gift (1 Cor. 14:5, 18, 39). He warns that it confers no badge of privilege and has value only in relation to love, without which the tongues of men and angels are mere clanging cymbals (1 Cor 13:1).

TONGUES AS A FORM OF PROPHECY

St. Paul indicates that the Holy Spirit may use the gift of tongues as a vehicle for delivering a message to a congregation of believers. Since this form of tongues is normally undecipherable, he insists that this is permissible only when someone in the congregation "interprets." *"If any are going to talk in tongues let it be at most two or three, each in turn, with another to interpret what they are saying. But! If there is no one to interpret, there should be silence in the assembly, each one speaking only to himself and to God."* (1 Cor. 14:27-28) Any tongue plus its interpretation is strictly subordinated to the inspired Scriptures, with which they must always agree. This doesn't bring new revelation not found in the Bible but usually words of correction, consolation, encouragement and exhortation for the group present.

PRESENT DAY EXPERIENCE

Praying in tongues is by far the most common of the more visibly supernatural manifestations of the Holy Spirit. The first time a person does it, he may feel exhilarated and drenched in the peaceful joy of conscious union with God. As he becomes more use to the gift, the emotional intensity normally decreases. He can pray in tongues as easily as he prays in his native language. He can stop when he wills to. He is under no compulsion and is not in a trance.

MANY BENEFITS

For many Christians, praying in tongues opens up a whole new sphere of communications with God. It is the prayer of the subconscious, expressing the inexpressible, enabling our whole being to reach beyond itself, to escape from its limitations into the vastness of God's love. Christians who have received this gift testify that it helps them when their own words seem inadequate, or when they don't know exactly what to pray for (cf. Rom. 8:26), when their mind is in turmoil or their will tempted, when they are depressed, anxious or weary. Like St. Paul, many Christians use the gift of tongues regularly in their private prayer life, while alternating it with other prayer models that engage the mind (cf. 1 Cor. 14:15). They may also pray or sing in tongues during prayer meetings and (if the congregation approves) during church services.

IS IT FOR EVERYBODY?

Does God want to give every Christian the gift of tongues? St. Paul wrote, *"I should like it if all of you spoke in tongues..."* (1 Cor 14:5). On the other hand, he implies a negative response to his question, *"Do all speak in tongues..."* (1 Cor. 12:30) It is probably impossible to determine this point with certainty. We can say that there is no command to pray in tongues. There are not "first class" Christians who do and "second class" Christians who don't. On the other hand, the gift of tongues is extremely common and is often the first of the sign gifts to manifest in a person's life. The vast majority of those who seek tongues eventually receive tongues. It is a rather rare exception of those who do not. However, it would be improper to ask God for this gift merely out of curiosity or for the sake of a novel thrill. Nor should we isolate tongues from the rest of the Christian life or exaggerate its function and importance. St. Paul often mentions it last in the gift lists.

RECEIVING THE GIFT OF TONGUES

As a preparation, first ponder the Scriptures on the promises and plan of God, especially the role of the Holy Spirit and His gifts. Accentuate the reading with prayer and periods of meditative listening to allow the Spirit the chance to reveal His will. When you are sure that you understand sufficiently what is involved (nobody ever understands completely) and that God is leading you in this direction, then pray for the Holy Spirit to manifest Himself within you in a new way. Let your prayer be free from any anxiety and brimming with expectant confidence. Remember His promise: *"If you, with all your sins know how to give your children good things, how much more will the heavenly Father give the holy Spirit to those who ask him."* (Luke 11:13).

Praying in tongues is a joint effort between you and the Holy Spirit. He will supply the new language but He will not force you to speak. It is necessary that you put your vocal apparatus into gear and begin speaking! Not in English, but merely by making sounds, by giving voice to whatever is within your spirit. Don't analyze. Don't be afraid to look foolish. Concentrate on God and express your worship of Him by means of the sounds you are making. Believe that the Holy Spirit is taking what comes up from inside of you and forming it into the gifts of tongues. Once you have received the gift of tongues, use it daily in your prayer life and experiment to discover how the gift can aid you to praise and love God. *"But you, beloved, grow strong in your holy faith through prayer in the Holy Spirit. Persevere in God's love, and welcome the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ which leads to life eternal."* (Jude 20-21)