

What We Know For Sure About Tongues

By Mark E Moore, PhD

1. Tongues was the ability to speak in a language which one had never studied (1 Cor. 12:28). It is only mentioned in Mk. 16:17–18; Acts 2:1–13; 10:44–48; 19:1–7; 1 Cor. 12–14; and was only practiced in Jerusalem, Caesarea, Ephesus and Corinth, all major metropolitan and multi-cultural cities. It is one of the easiest gifts to imitate and, in fact, is found in religions around the world from the most ancient times to the present.
2. Tongues appears to be human languages, not angelic (Acts 2:8–11; 1 Cor 14:10). *Heterais glossais* was the normal Greek phrase for foreign languages. 1 Cor 13:1 is hyperbolic and hypothetical. In other words, Paul is clearly exaggerating in this text to make a point. There is no evidence that Paul ever spoke in a non-human language.
3. All Spiritual Gifts are for the building up of the body. This is true for tongues as well. Thus, we can assume that Paul (and the Holy Spirit), intend for tongues to build up the body (1 Cor 14:1–8 [14:14–16, even praying or singing in a tongue is clearly to be interpreted for the benefit of the body]). Paul's statement that tongues edify the individual (1 Cor 14:4) is not meant as a compliment.
4. Not every believer should expect to speak in tongues (1 Cor. 12:7–11, 29–30). The questions of vv. 29–30, in Greek are constructed so as to expect a negative answer.
5. We should not forbid the speaking in tongues; Paul would have liked all the Corinthians to speak in tongues (1 Cor 14:5, 39).
6. *Glossolalia* is a lesser gift (1 Cor 12:27–30) which Paul said would pass away (1 Cor 13:8–10).
7. Uninterpreted *glossolalia* contributed to confusion in the Corinthian church (1 Cor 14:6–17, 23). Five understandable words were better than 10,000 words of *glossolalia* without interpretation (14:19).
8. There are parameters to speaking in tongues (1 Cor 14:27–28): (a) 2–3 max in one service, (b) must be interpreted, (c) must not be done all at once so as to create confusion.
9. Tongues is a sign for unbelievers (1 Cor 14:22, cf. Acts 2), but without prophecy (or clear preaching), it will not lead unbelievers to repentance (1 Cor 14:22–25, cf. Acts 2). Verse 22 seems to contradict vv. 23–25. In light of the quotation from Isaiah 28:11–12, in which Israel's priests are compared to babbling drunkards, this can hardly be seen as a commendation. It seems like a backhanded compliment: Although tongues are supposed to be a sign for unbelievers, left uninterpreted, they only cause confusion outside the church as well as in.
10. Tongues appear most during periods of revival, particularly in protest to rationalism, and are most prominent among the poor and socially disenfranchised.