

Speaking in Tongues
Central Christian Church Position Paper

Central Christian Church does not practice “speaking in tongues” in our corporate worship services. We do not believe that speaking in tongues is necessary to prove the presence of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:7-11). However, we do not withhold membership from those who believe they have been given this gift, if they agree to exercise their gift privately. Below is a brief explanation of this issue from our perspective.

The Greek New Testament word often translated “tongues” literally means “languages.” Acts 2 describes “speaking in tongues” as a miraculous gift given to the disciples so they could communicate the Gospel in foreign languages. Jews from many different nations heard the disciples speaking “in their native language” (Acts 2:8). The disciples were not babbling or communicating in an unknown angelic language, but rather speaking intelligible languages they had never studied. The miracle had a two-fold purpose: 1) to more quickly spread the Gospel to those different languages; and 2) to prove the reliability of the apostles’ message. (Since the New Testament hadn’t been written, there was nothing to verify the apostles’ bold claims about Jesus Christ.)

However, unlike the Acts 2 example, the “speaking in tongues” practiced today is usually not understandable in any language. It is often called a “prayer language” or an “angelic language,” only understandable by God. Some charismatic Christians say that the ability to speak in tongues is a test of one’s faith or a test of the true filling of the Holy Spirit. The Bible says that all Christians will receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38), but that not all Christians will speak in tongues (1 Corinthians 12:7-11).

Other Christians claim the practice of speaking in tongues is ungodly and that those who advocate it are teaching a “false doctrine.” They oppose speaking in tongues because the miracle cannot be verified since the individual is claiming to speak in an “angelic” or “unknown” tongue. To the opposition, these unsubstantiated “miracles” seem to devalue the original Acts 2 miracle, which was verified by people from different languages. Also, the pagan religions often practice “babbling,” where the worshipper makes strange, uncontrollable utterances to their god. “Speaking in tongues” seems to some people like nothing more than an imitation of this practice. Since God is a God of order and truth, speaking in uncontrolled, incomprehensible utterances seems ungodly.

However, in 1 Corinthians 14:2, Paul mentions the type of “prayer language” that charismatics claim to be speaking. He says, “For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit.” He takes three chapters, 1 Corinthians 12-

14, to explain how we should view the supernatural gifts, especially the gift of speaking in tongues, and how they should be used in worship. He asks that we not all speak in tongues during corporate worship lest the world think we are out of our minds (1 Corinthians 14:23), and that we do all things decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40). He says that intelligible words are more beneficial to the church, (“...in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue” (1 Corinthians 14:19), but we are not to forbid speaking in tongues. He emphasizes that the spiritual gift of love is the “greatest gift.”

We should not flippantly assign the term “miracle” to something that is not. Yet neither should we put God in our box and claim that He can only work the way we think He should. Some will try to point to Paul’s claim in 1 Corinthians 13:8 that “tongues... will be stilled” as proof that “speaking in tongues” was a temporary spiritual gift to verify the Gospel message before the New Testament was written. This ideology states that since we now have God’s Word, we no longer need the miraculous or supernatural gift. (The same is said of the supernatural gifts of prophecy and healing.) It is true that those gifts are not needed to verify the message of the Gospel because the New Testament is sufficient. (See also Hebrews 2:3-4.) But if God wants to allow someone to speak in an angelic tongue or a foreign language, He can do that as well today as He could in the New Testament.

Throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul repeatedly emphasized that the spiritual gifts should promote unity in the church rather than disharmony. Because this is not a clear-cut biblical issue, we do not forbid members to speak in tongues. However, to maintain unity and harmony at Central, we ask that they agree to do so privately, that they not interrupt the worship service in exercising their gift, that they refrain from encouraging others to speak in tongues, and that they not use their gift as a test of faith. Romans 14:22 might be wise advice in this matter: “So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves.”