A Biblical and Pastoral Look at Speaking in Tongues

Why We Speak in Tongues

At the most basic level, we speak in tongues because it is a gift the Holy Spirit has given to the Church. No one unwraps gifts at Christmas out of obligation. Children open gifts because they are excited about the love and generosity of their parents. In the same way, we want everything God has for us. We are not trying to earn anything or prove anything. We simply do not want to leave any present unwrapped under the Christmas tree.

What Tongues Are

Before anything else, it helps to clear up the language. The phrase "speaking in tongues" comes from older English Bible translations. The word *tongues* simply means languages. In the New Testament, it refers to Spirit-given languages—speech the believer never learned, given by the Holy Spirit.

Tongues are mystical in the truest sense. They are supernatural and Spirit-empowered, but not strange or chaotic. They are one of the nine gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:7–11), and Scripture describes them primarily as prayer directed to God—prayer, praise, thanksgiving, and worship (1 Corinthians 14:2, 14–17).

On the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit enabled believers to speak in languages they had never learned, and people from many nations heard the mighty works of God in their own native tongues (Acts 2:4–11). At Babel, languages scattered the nations. At Pentecost, the Spirit used languages to gather them (Genesis 11:1–9). Pentecost broke the curse of Babel and showed that the gospel was for every nation.

Tongues of Men and of Angels

At Pentecost, the languages were earthly ones—the crowd recognized them. But that is not the whole picture. Paul speaks of "the tongues of men and of angels" (1 Corinthians 13:1), and he says the one who speaks in a tongue speaks "mysteries" to God that no one present understands (14:2). A prayer language may be a human language the speaker never learned, or it may be a heavenly language no one on earth could identify. Either way, it is real speech, given by the Spirit and directed to God. This is why Jack Hayford's phrase "spiritual language" is so helpful.

Reading 1 Corinthians 12–14 Together

Paul's teaching on tongues is one continuous argument across three chapters.

Chapter 12 is the gifts.

Chapter 13 is the gift that governs them all—love.

Chapter 14 is the order and flow of the gifts in the gathered church.

Love is also the first fruit of the Spirit named in Galatians 5:22. The bridge between the chapters is 14:1: "Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts." Paul does not set love against the gifts. He insists that love govern them. These chapters belong together and should never be set against one another.

The Public Gift and the Prayer Language

Read together, these chapters reveal two different uses of tongues: the public gift of tongues and the prayer language. This is a distinction of purpose, not a claim that the New Testament names two separate gifts. But once you see it, much of what seems confusing in Paul's teaching becomes clear.

Consider two statements that seem at first to contradict each other. In 1 Corinthians 12:30, Paul asks, "Do all speak with tongues?" The expected answer is no. Yet two chapters later he says, "I wish you all spoke with tongues" (14:5). Paul is not contradicting himself. He is speaking about two different uses.

The Public Gift of Tongues

In chapter 12, tongues are listed among the gifts given "for the profit of all" (12:7). The Holy Spirit moves on a believer to bring a message in tongues to the gathered church or to individuals within it. Here the people are the audience, so the message must be interpreted (14:5, 13, 27). This is what Paul means when he says, "If I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching?" (14:6). The public gift comes as the Spirit wills (12:11), and not everyone will be used this way.

The Prayer Language

In chapter 14, Paul reveals tongues as prayer. "He who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries" (14:2). Here God is the audience. The believer's spirit, moved by the Holy Spirit, speaks to God. "If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful" (14:14). The mind does not follow the words, yet the one praying is built up: "He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself" (14:4). This is the use Paul wishes for everyone, and it is something a believer may use intentionally—"I will pray with the spirit" (14:15).

Even in the middle of his instructions about interpretation, Paul returns to the prayer language. If no interpreter is present, the speaker is to "keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God" (14:28). He is not silenced before God. He simply stops addressing the congregation and keeps his tongue where it belongs—between himself and God.

Two Uses at a Glance

Question	Public gift of tongues	The prayer language
Who is speaking?	The Holy Spirit gives a message through a believer	The believer's spirit, moved by the Holy Spirit
Who is listening?	The congregation, or the individuals it is directed to	God
What is the purpose?	To build up the church	Prayer, praise, worship, and personal strengthening
Is interpretation needed?	Yes, so the hearers can understand and be built up	No—it is Godward prayer, offered with love and order
Who receives it?	Not all (12:30); given as the Spirit wills (12:11)	Paul wishes it for all (14:5); used intentionally (14:15)
Where is it used?	In the gathered church, as the Spirit leads	In private devotion, and in the gathered church through worship, singing, and prayer
Key texts	1 Corinthians 12:7–11, 28–30; 14:5–6, 13, 26–28	1 Corinthians 14:2, 4–5, 14–18, 28

Jack Hayford put it simply: "We do not confuse the public gift and the private exercise of the spiritual language."[1] The prayer language is personal, but it is not limited to the prayer closet.

Tongues in the Gathered Church

What Is the Conclusion Then?

Right after saying that his understanding is unfruitful when he prays in a tongue, Paul asks, "What is the conclusion then?" His answer is not to stop. "I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding" (14:15). Paul is speaking of the prayer language, and he holds both together—praying and singing in the Spirit, and praying and singing with understanding.

That is what we most commonly see in healthy churches today. Not uninterpreted messages delivered to the room, but believers praying and worshiping in the Spirit while also praying and singing with understanding. Paul still cares about the people in the room. He asks how someone can say "Amen" to a thanksgiving they cannot understand (14:16–17), so those who lead prayer and worship lead in a way that invites others in rather than leaving them out.

A Symphony of Worship

The difference between the prayer language and the public gift is not quiet versus loud. In a gathered time of praise, believers may pray or sing in the Spirit out loud—sometimes with great enthusiasm—alongside others worshiping with understanding. When the whole congregation is lifting its voice to God together, it is not one person drawing attention to himself. It is a symphony, and it is in order.

But when one voice rises above the rest, breaks into the shared worship, and draws the whole room's attention, it is functioning as a message to the people. Then Paul's instructions apply: one at a time, and with interpretation (14:27–28).

The question is not volume. The question is direction—to God, or to the people?

Power with Self-Control

Some people imagine that speaking in tongues means losing control. Scripture says otherwise. “The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets” (14:32). Paul says this about prophecy, but it reflects the whole chapter. He repeatedly calls for choices: “I will pray,” “I will sing” (14:15); speakers take turns (14:27); a speaker without an interpreter keeps silent (14:28). The Holy Spirit gives the gift, and we yield to Him freely. He does not override us. Self-control is itself a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23).

The gifts and the fruit belong together. Exodus 28:33–35 describes golden bells and pomegranates alternating on the hem of the high priest’s robe. As an illustration, the bells call to mind the nine gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12, and the pomegranates the ninefold fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. The sound and the fruit move together. The Spirit’s power should always be expressed with the Spirit’s character.

Spiritual intensity is not the absence of self-control.

Spiritual order is not the absence of God’s power.

Why Are Tongues a Sign to Unbelievers?

Paul writes that “tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers” (14:22). He says this right after quoting Isaiah: “With men of other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people; and yet, for all that, they will not hear Me” (14:21; Isaiah 28:11–12).

In Isaiah’s day, Israel’s priests and prophets reeled with wine and mocked the prophet’s plain teaching (Isaiah 28:7–10). God had offered them rest and refreshing, “yet they would not hear” (Isaiah 28:12). So He warned that they would hear the foreign speech of Assyrian invaders instead. For those who refused His voice, strange tongues became a sign of judgment.

Paul saw the same pattern unfolding in his own generation. On the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit gave tongues, and the crowd divided. Some were cut to the heart and believed (Acts 2:37–41). Others mocked and said, “They are full of new wine” (Acts 2:13)—the very charge of drunkenness that marked Isaiah’s scoffers. The same sign that opened the door of the new covenant to those who received it stood as a witness against those who rejected their Messiah, while the old covenant order was growing old and would soon pass away (Hebrews 8:13).

There is a searching word in this for us. Throughout the Gospels, those most confident in their religious framework were often the ones most offended by Jesus’ words and works. The early Church struggled to accept that God would pour out His Spirit on the Gentiles (Acts 10:44–48; 11:15–18). Religion still resists what it cannot control. When tongues offend us, it is worth asking whether the Spirit is confronting something in our own framework. New wine needs new wineskins (Luke 5:38). The problem is rarely the wine. It is the wineskin.

This is also why Paul says uninterpreted tongues do not help an outsider. If an unbeliever walks in while everyone is speaking in tongues, “will they not say that you are out of your mind?” (14:23). But when prophecy speaks plainly, the secrets of the heart are revealed, and he will fall down and worship God (14:24–25). In the gathering, what God says to the people must be understood.

Paul's Own Practice

In the very chapter where Paul corrects the misuse of tongues, he makes a remarkable confession: "I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all" (14:18). He did not treat tongues as an embarrassment to be explained away. He thanked God for it and practiced it often. And in the church, he would rather speak five words that teach others than ten thousand in a tongue (14:19). Personal prayer and public ministry each have their place.

Paul closes his instructions with two commands that must always be held together: "Do not forbid to speak with tongues. Let all things be done decently and in order" (14:39–40). He does not correct misuse by banning the gift. He corrects it with love, interpretation, and order.

The answer to abuse is not disuse.

The answer to abuse is right use.

A Needed Clarification

There are parts of the body of Christ that do not believe in speaking in tongues, or that neglect it because they have never experienced it or do not understand it. That reality is not new. Throughout Church history, gifts of the Spirit have often offended religious minds because they confront our desire for control and self-reliance.

Yet speaking in tongues is not a modern invention or a fringe practice. It appears at the birth of the Church and throughout the book of Acts (Acts 2:4; 10:46; 19:6). Around AD 180, Irenaeus of Lyons wrote that he heard many in the Church who had prophetic gifts and who, through the Spirit, spoke in all kinds of languages.[2]

The two oldest branches of the Church, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, have never condemned the gift. The Orthodox Church carries the faith of the early Fathers and honors the same Spirit who fell at Pentecost. Within Orthodoxy, tongues is not widely practiced, but it is not condemned. Archimandrite Zacharias, one of the most respected Orthodox spiritual fathers of our time, counsels that the gift be received without condemnation, and with discernment.[3] Orthodox believers have testified to it as well—most notably in the renewal movement led by Fr. Eusebius Stephanou, a Greek Orthodox priest, beginning in the late 1960s.[4]

By the Vatican's estimate, at least 120 million Catholics are active in charismatic renewal today, and tens of millions more have passed through it. In 2019 Pope Francis urged them to share the baptism in the Holy Spirit with the whole Church: "Share it! Do not keep it for yourself!"[5] Large streams of Protestant Christianity embrace the gift as well. Around the world, by conservative count, nearly 700 million Christians—Catholic, Protestant, and independent—now belong to Pentecostal and charismatic expressions of the faith. In 1970 there were fewer than 60 million. No stream of Christianity has grown faster over the past half century.[6]

Those who reject speaking in tongues are a minority within the body of Christ, and many of them appeal to a strong commitment to Scripture. Yet Scripture never teaches that tongues were meant to cease before Christ returns. The New Testament presents tongues as a gift given by the Spirit, encouraged rather than discouraged, and never withdrawn. Paul's command is plain: "Do not forbid to speak with tongues." A high view of Scripture should lead us to faithful stewardship, not silent dismissal.

At the same time, not every question about tongues comes from a hardened heart. Some believers have honest questions from Scripture. Others have witnessed confusion, pressure, or disorder. Those concerns deserve a respectful and scriptural answer. Speaking in tongues should not be dismissed as emotionalism or reduced to a stereotype of Pentecostal excess. Like every gift of the Spirit, tongues are meant to operate in love, order, and humility, not hype. The answer to misunderstanding is not rejection, but clarity.

We have a deep hunger for everything the Holy Spirit desires to give the Church—not just tongues, but all the gifts that reveal Jesus, strengthen believers, and build up the body in love. In many nations, people are coming to Christ as the gospel is preached with both truth and spiritual power.

The Fruit and Benefit of This Gift

The Bible does not only describe what speaking in tongues is, but also what it does. The one who prays in a tongue is built up (14:4). Jude urges us to build ourselves up "praying in the Holy Spirit" (Jude 20), and Paul tells us that the Spirit helps us in our weakness when we do not know what to pray (Romans 8:26). Not all praying in the Spirit is tongues, but tongues is one precious way the Spirit helps us pray. When language falls short, He helps us cry out from a deeper place within.

Modern research has observed something striking here. In a brain-imaging study at the University of Pennsylvania, people praying in tongues showed decreased activity in the frontal lobes—the region associated with intentional, self-directed control.[7] The researchers noted that this fits what practitioners have long described: the words are not consciously composed. Another study of fifty-two believers found that those who prayed in tongues showed lower biological markers of stress and arousal on ordinary days.[8]

These are small studies, and science does not explain the spiritual source of this gift or replace Scripture. But it has observed something real. The experience is not imagined, forced, or rehearsed.

At its core, speaking in tongues is not about spectacle or pressure. It is about communion. It is a gift meant to strengthen faith, deepen prayer, and invite the believer into a posture of trust and surrender before God.

A Pastoral Safeguard

Not every Christian speaks in tongues, and that does not make them less Christian. The gifts of the Spirit are not a measure of spiritual rank or proof that someone belongs to Christ. Scripture is clear that without love, even the tongues of men and of angels become "sounding brass or a clanging cymbal" (1 Corinthians 13:1). Love remains the goal.

We believe the prayer language is a wonderful gift available to believers, and we want everyone to feel free to ask for it. But neither the prayer language nor the public gift is a test of salvation, maturity, or the Holy Spirit's presence in a believer's life. Our role is to teach, encourage, and make room—never to pressure anyone into an experience.

A Final Invitation

If this stirs curiosity or hunger in your heart, that is not something to suppress. Scripture encourages us to desire spiritual gifts, and the word *desire* is a passionate one. In 1 Corinthians 14:1, the Greek word *zēloō* means to earnestly long for or burn with zeal. It is not a call to casual interest, but an invitation to open your heart with intention and holy hunger.

You may find yourself drawn to different gifts for different reasons. Perhaps you need greater discernment as you navigate leadership, business, or family. Maybe you are longing for wisdom or knowledge as you steward responsibility and vision. You may desire the prayer language as a way to deepen your prayer life and communion with God. These are not random impulses. Scripture teaches that the Holy Spirit distributes gifts to meet real needs in real lives.

And you do not need to be afraid to ask. Jesus said no father would give his son a serpent when he asked for a fish. “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!” (Luke 11:13). When you ask your Father for the Spirit and His gifts, you will not receive something false.

Jesus is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit, and the Father delights to give good gifts to His children. You do not need to strive, perform, or manufacture anything. Simply ask, posture your heart in trust, and receive everything heaven is eager to give.

If you have questions or would like to talk with someone further, please reach out to the Encounter Church staff. We would be honored to walk with you.

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Scripture References

Genesis 11:1–9; Exodus 28:33–35; Isaiah 28:7–13; Luke 5:36–39; 11:11–13; Acts 2:1–18, 37–41; 8:14–17; 10:44–48; 11:15–17; 19:1–7; Romans 8:26; 1 Corinthians 12:7–11, 28–31; 13:1–13; 14:1–6, 13–19, 21–28, 32, 39–40; Galatians 5:22–23; Hebrews 8:13; Jude 20.

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Notes and Further Reading

1. Jack Hayford, “‘Tongues’ ARE Worth Bothering About!” Jack Hayford Ministries (May 12, 2014): https://www.jackhayford.org/tongues-are-worth-bothering-about/. See also Hayford, *The Beauty of Spiritual Language* (Thomas Nelson, 1996).

2. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 5.6.1, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, trans. Alexander Roberts and W. H. Rambaut (1885). The passage is also preserved in Eusebius, *Church History* 5.7.6.

3. Archimandrite Zacharias (Zacharou), *The Hidden Man of the Heart (1 Peter 3:4): The Cultivation of the Heart in Orthodox Christian Anthropology* (Mount Thabor Publishing, 2008), chap. 15, “On the Gift of Speaking in Tongues.”

4. On Fr. Eusebius Stephanou (1924–2016) and the Orthodox charismatic renewal, see “Greek Orthodox Church Tries to Muzzle a Popular Charismatic Priest,” *Christianity Today* (November 25, 1983). The movement’s reports in *Logos* magazine are documented, from a critical standpoint, in Fr. Seraphim Rose, *Orthodoxy and the Religion of the Future*, chapter “The ‘Charismatic Revival’ as a Sign of the Times.”

5. Gina Christian, “Catholic Charismatic Renewal Creates ‘Church on Fire’ with God’s Love, Says Bishop,” OSV News (April 18, 2024), reporting the Vatican’s estimate and Bishop Peter L. Smith’s note that 60 to 120 million more have passed through the renewal; Pope Francis’s address to CHARIS (June 8, 2019) is reported in Catholic News Agency, “With International Service Group, Pope Connects Catholic Charismatics to Broader Church” (June 9, 2019).

6. Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, *Status of Global Christianity, 2026, in the Context of 1900–2075* (World Christian Database), which counts 676 million Pentecostals/Charismatics in 2026 and projects more than 1.1 billion by 2075. An earlier study projected nearly 800 million by 2025; see Todd M. Johnson, “Counting Pentecostals Worldwide,” *Pneuma* 36 (2014).

7. Andrew B. Newberg et al., “The Measurement of Regional Cerebral Blood Flow During Glossolalia: A Preliminary SPECT Study,” *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging* 148 (2006): 67–71.

8. Christopher D. Lynn et al., “Glossolalia Is Associated with Differences in Biomarkers of Stress and Arousal among Apostolic Pentecostals,” *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 1, no. 3 (2011).

Teaching influence: Harold R. Eberle, WorldCast Ministries Bible Study, Session 8, especially its distinction between the gift of tongues and the prayer language in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14.

Additional reading on 1 Corinthians 14:20–25: B. C. Johanson, “Tongues, a Sign for Unbelievers?” *New Testament Studies* 25 (1979): 180–203.