

# TONGUES

#Pentecost #SpiritualGifts #SpeakingInTongues

The Spiritual Gift of Tongues / Heavenly Language

## TONGUES

Speaking in tongues is a unique spiritual experience where we are praying often “with words we don’t understand” yet are ministering to God - spirit to spirit.

Speaking in tongues is a way of God edifying and encouraging us.

Speaking in tongues can be a form of encouragement to others when the message in tongues is then interpreted \*See 1 Cor. 12-14

Regarding speaking in tongues, John MacArthur argues in his book that tongues-speech in the New Testament “always involved speaking a human language, whereas tongues-speech today never involves speaking a human language. Therefore, contemporary tongues-speech is “gibberish” that has nothing to do with the New Testament spiritual gift.”

There are good reasons to doubt both prongs of MacArthur’s argument. Anecdotal evidence indicates that at least some contemporary tongues-speech involves human languages. For example, *Global Witness to Pentecost* by Jordan Daniel May compiles 88 testimonies from reputable sources where one person spoke in a tongue that a second person recognized as a human language.<sup>[55]</sup> Admittedly, such occurrences are rare. Nevertheless, if they happen, then what MacArthur himself considers biblical tongues-speech continues today. More importantly, there are several reasons to question whether the New Testament teaches that tongues-speech is always a human language. According to MacArthur, “the only detailed description of the true gift of tongues in Scripture is found in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost — a text that clearly identifies this gift as the supernatural ability to speak genuine, meaningful, translatable languages” (Acts 2:4,6–11).<sup>[56]</sup> This statement is false.

Acts 2 is not “the only detailed description of the true gift of tongues.” If anything, 1 Corinthians 12–14 contains an even more detailed description of tongues. Acts 2 is simply the only description that contains the detail that the tongues-speech of Pentecost involved human languages. A different understanding of tongues-speech emerges through a close reading of 1 Corinthians 12–14.

First, whereas Acts 2:6–11 assumes that tongues-speech is naturally intelligible to hearers, 1 Corinthians 12–14 assumes that it is naturally unintelligible to them. Paul writes, “anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to

God. Indeed no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit” (14:2). And, “when you are praising God in the Spirit, how can someone else, who is now put in the position of an inquirer, say ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying?” (14:16). And, “if ... everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?” (14:23).

Second, whereas Acts 2:6–11 assumes that the interpretation of tongues is a natural process in which a native speaker understands his or her own language, 1 Corinthians 12–14 assumes that it is a supernatural gift. “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good ... to still another the interpretation of tongues” (12:7–10). “For this reason the one who speaks in a tongue should pray that they may interpret what they say” (14:13).

Third, in 1 Corinthians 14:6,10–12, Paul analogizes uninterpreted tongues-speech (*glossais*) to an uninterpreted foreign language (*phanon/phones*). As Gordon Fee points out, Paul’s “use of earthly languages as a analogy in 14:10–12 implies that it is not a known earthly language, since a thing is not usually identical with that to which it is analogous.”<sup>[57]</sup> Unless there is a difference between tongues-speech and human language here, Paul’s comparison is tautologous rather than analogous.

Fourth, Paul’s reference to “the tongues ... of angels” (1 Corinthians 13:1) may indicate that he and/or the Corinthians believed that tongues-speech could be angelic, rather than human, in nature. The Testament of Job, a roughly contemporaneous Jewish document, similarly refers to humans speaking angelic languages through the power of the Holy Spirit. This indicates that the notion of angelic languages was not unknown in Paul’s time.<sup>[58]</sup>

If these lines of reasoning are correct, then the fact that the majority of contemporary tongues-speech is not a human language does not count against its biblical authenticity.

One more point: MacArthur derides the use of a “private ‘prayer language’ ” as a form of “self-gratification.”<sup>[59]</sup> Given that tongues-speech is a gift of the Spirit, it would be more accurate to say that the Spirit is edifying the individual who speaks an uninterpreted tongue, rather than that the individual is edifying him- or herself. Granting that interpreted tongues-speech is more beneficial to the congregation as a whole, the question remains why individual edification is wrong. If it is right to edify others, how can it be wrong to be edified oneself? MacArthur would answer that “Paul would never extol prayers that bypass the mind.”<sup>[60]</sup> But that is arguable. Paul states that uninterpreted tongues-speech “edifies” the speaker (1 Corinthians 14:4). Further, he states, “my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful” (14:14). Taken together, this seems to imply that Paul recognizes such a thing as a spiritual but nonrational form of edification.

MacArthur also cites Paul’s instruction that public tongues-speakers ask God to be able to interpret their tongues-speech (1 Corinthians 14:13,14).<sup>[61]</sup> But this is

a rule for public tongues-speech. MacArthur wrongly applies this rule to private tongues-speech without noting Paul's explicit, public-oriented reasoning. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul gives no rule whatsoever about private tongues-speech.