

THE GIFT OF TONGUES—AVAILABLE TO ALL

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Here is why I believe that the gift of tongues is available for the asking:

Scripture differentiates office and gift. When Paul says that the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,” he is not referring to everyone who prophesies but to those who have a stewardship to both minister the gift and release it. Paul speaks of apostles and prophets in his discussion of spiritual gifts (I Cor. 12:28), then asks, “Are all apostles? Are all prophets?” (v. 29). He is referring to ministry, not to gifting. The obvious answer is, “No, not all are apostles.” In that context he asks about healing and tongues, begging the same answer. He is not saying that all will not see people healed through prayer, because the whole body of Christ takes on the fight against sickness. Following the same reasoning, neither is he saying that all will not speak in tongues. We must differentiate practice and consistent ministry. We read that “you can all prophesy” (I Cor. 14:31), so we pray for confidence that we will. We read that “your sons and daughters will prophesy” (Peter’s Pentecost sermon), so it seems to suggest that prophecy is available to all. That does not mean that all are called to the office of prophecy. All are not called to a healing ministry, but all are certainly expected to pray for the sick. The gifts of the Spirit are available to all, including faith, wisdom, prophecy, and miraculous works. There is no gift of the Spirit that we are not expected to express, according to the need of the moment. Why would that not also include the gift which showed up often (perhaps all the time) when the Spirit was poured out in the book of Acts? To say anything different seems out of step with an understanding of the gifts.

Paul’s Two Words. Why would Paul say, “I would like every one of you to speak in tongues” (I Cor. 14:5), if the gift were not available? How might that sentence be finished? It could logically be finished with the phrase, “And, of course, you can.” It could not be finished with, “But unfortunately that gift is not available to everyone.” Because I believe that the gift of tongues is available to all, I can say (and I have), “I would like every one of you to speak in tongues” just like Paul said. It would be inappropriate for those who don’t understand the gift in this way to say, “I would like every one of you to speak in tongues.”

The statement, “I thank God I speak in tongues more than you all,” makes no sense if the gift is not available to all. It suggests that the gift was highly advantageous to practice and that it is available to all; otherwise it is a statement of pride. He was saying, I believe, that he practices the gift often so as to not demean it, but he practices the prophetic gift more in the worshiping community because of the nature of the gift. The gift of tongues is exercised most often in private, whereas the gift of prophecy is exercised in public, because it is outwardly directed rather than internally, as the gift of tongues is.

The Issue of Self-exclusion. The net effect of believing that the gift is not available to all is that many people talk themselves out of it. When they hear that it is only available to some, they typically exclude themselves. That is the nature of cautious humanity and a natural reticence with regard to spiritual gifts, and especially to one as foreign to them as speaking in a language that they have never learned. They immediately join the “I won’t

get it” crowd, and sure enough, they don’t. My experience in praying for people to be filled and to speak in tongues is that the majority of them do, sometimes the overwhelming majority. When the option is offered that they might not be among those who are called to receive, that drops to slightly above zero percent receiving the gift. The same thing would happen if we said that prophecy is not available to all. Because we have never prophesied before, and because the thought of doing it for the first time scares us, we naturally exclude ourselves—and our outlook is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If salvation were not truly promised to all, wouldn’t many likewise exclude themselves by virtue of their lives? To say to people, “This gift is not for everyone,” creates doubt rather than faith. They wonder if they will be among the fortunate ones, but they tend to be less than aggressive in seeking the gift rather than eagerly desiring the gifts as Paul admonishes.

Examples are instructive. One does not build a theology around examples, but they do strengthen one’s case. The examples of Acts 2, 10 and 19 in which the Spirit fell and the recipients spoke in tongues does support the statement that the gift is available to all who are filled with the Spirit.

The Purpose of the Gift. The gift of tongues is given to build up the user. It is the only gift for personal use. The gift of healing, for instance “belongs” to the one needing healing. All the gifts direct us toward others except one, speaking in tongues: “He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church” (I Cor. 14:4). It only makes sense that the one gift which builds up the receive would be available to all. Would God give a gift that brings personal strenght, then say it is only available to some? I don’t think so. As we grow in the use of tongues, and thereby build ourselves up, we would be preparing ourselves to step into others gifts. What a rich gift to open the door for prophecy, discernment and other gifts. And what a gift to make available to all of God’s people! We need to encourage people that they can speak in tongues, not that it might not be available to them.