

PRAYING IN TONGUES

by Kelly Tshibaka

I ONCE THOUGHT IT WAS WEIRD

I used to think speaking in tongues (also known as your “spirit language” or “praying in the spirit”) was weird. It never was talked about in any of the churches I went to—from Methodist to Baptist to charismatic Bible churches. No one I knew did it. And I had heard stories of people pretending to speak in tongues or using it to their own personal advantage.

Many years into being a Christian, a mentor explained to me what the Bible says about tongues and how it’s actually a natural overflow of the Holy Spirit living in me. My understanding of the gift of tongues completely changed—it no longer was weird. I understood how it worked, why it was biblical, and that I was able to pray in tongues simply by virtue of the Holy Spirit living in me.

So then I really wanted to speak in tongues, but I couldn’t.

I had spirit-filled person after spirit-filled person pray for me. Nothing happened. I pleaded and pleaded with God in prayer for the “gift of tongues.” Still nothing happened. I tried it on my own, but all that came out was gobbledy-gook.

I talked to my mentor about it. He explained—again—that I already could speak in tongues. I didn’t need an extra special imparting of the Spirit. I already *had* the Spirit. The problem was with my mind. My mind was so used to knowing (and controlling) everything going on in my head and coming out of my mouth that it was having a hard time making way for my spirit to express itself. He explained it like this: my mind was telling me that I must be speaking gibberish if my words didn’t come from my mind (but from my spirit instead). Therefore, I was having a hard time believing that if I spoke in tongues I would be doing anything more than speaking gobbledy-gook.

My breakthrough came when my oldest child was about 18 months old. She talked a lot, but the only person who could understand her was me. To me, she was nearly fluent. We would have complete conversations! But other people would listen to her, stare blankly, and turn to me for an interpretation.

That's when I realized that it was like she was talking in tongues! It sounded like gobbledygook to the whole world, but to me. I understood her perfectly. And more than that, I delighted in her trying to talk—I knew that she soon would speak with perfect clarity and these early words would be part of a special bond we shared.

Observing my daughter learn to talk gave me permission to practice learning how to talk in tongues. I believed my Father was delighted to share these early words with me. I believed He understood me. And I accepted that I probably would sound like I was saying a whole lot of gobbledygook—at least until I became more fluent!

BIBLICAL BASIS FOR PRAYING IN TONGUES

The Biblical basis for speaking in tongues is found in the larger context of the Gospel story. The Bible is a story of *oneness created* (God created us to be one with Him and with each other), *oneness destroyed* (sin separated us from God and each other), and *oneness restored* (through the death and resurrection of Jesus).

Our introduction to the Holy Spirit happens in Genesis. When God *breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life*,¹ the word used for *breath* is the same word used for *Spirit*. The Spirit of God was breathed into Adam, and because that Spirit was Life, *Adam became a living soul*.² With every breath we take, we reflect the very Creator who breathed life into us in the beginning.

Before sin, physical life and spiritual life were the same. That's how God designed it. When we sinned, however, the two were separated—now it is possible to be alive physically, but dead spiritually. Jesus makes clear, *unless one is born again—of water and the Spirit—he cannot enter into the kingdom of God*.³ Through faith in Jesus Christ, we have the capacity to be filled anew with the Spirit (breath, life) of God and to live eternally.

The Gospel story reveals God's plan for fixing the mess we made—He progressively breaks into our human condition to meet our need. In the Old Testament, we see God breaking into the suffering of Israel to deliver them from slavery under Pharaoh, give them the Law to protect them, and save them from enemy after enemy. At the beginning of the New Testament, God responds to our need for a Savior by revealing Himself in the person of Jesus

¹ Genesis 2:7

² Genesis 2:7

³ John 3:3, 5

Christ. And the remainder of the New Testament shows how God empowers new believers through revelation of the Holy Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit following Jesus' ascension is just as critical to God's redemptive plan as the death and resurrection of Jesus were.

The Holy Spirit in us is a person, not a thing. He guides us, works in us, and works through us.⁴ He grieves, He is a source of joy, and He speaks through us.⁵ The Bible gives example of the Spirit empowering us with words that are in our native tongue (English) and also with words that are in other tongues, whether other human languages or the languages of angels.⁶

One of the characteristics that most distinguishes God from all the other gods people have worshipped is that *God talks*. He is not like idols that cannot speak; He was not carved by a craftsman.⁷ He is not *our* creation; we are *His* creation. And His *talking* Spirit in us is proof of that. In fact, Jesus said, *These signs will accompany those who have believed: ...they will speak with new tongues.*⁸

WHAT IS TALKING IN TONGUES?

Talking in tongues is similar to talking in any other language. For a woman who knows Spanish, for example, it is very natural for her to just start speaking in Spanish. She isn't taken over by some other power, doesn't go into a trance, or lose control of her tongue before she can say *gracias*. In the same way, it is very natural for believers to speak in tongues. We simply choose to let the Spirit talk through us. There is no physical feeling that comes beforehand, no power that takes you over, and no commandeering of your tongue. It's natural.

The main difference between talking in a learned foreign language and talking in tongues is that you won't understand what you're saying when you're speaking in tongues: *For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.*⁹ Rather than going to that place in your mind where you cataloged years of Spanish classes, you go to the Spirit inside of you instead. He knows all of the 7,000+ languages of the world and all of the languages of the angels. When you give Him permission to speak, He speaks the pure word of God in one of these languages, free from the (often contaminating) filter of your mind.

There are three kinds of purposes for speaking in tongues seen in Scripture: to evangelize pre-believers, to edify the body of believers, and to use as a prayer language. For example, we see

⁴ John 16:12-15, 1 Peter 1:2, Galatians 5:22

⁵ Ephesians 4:30, Luke 10:21, 1 Thessalonians 1:6, Matthew 10:20, Acts 2:4, 1 Corinthians 2:13

⁶ 1 Corinthians 13:1

⁷ Jeremiah 10:5, Habakkuk 2:18

⁸ Mark 16:17

⁹ 1 Corinthians 14:14

the disciples in the Upper Room speaking in tongues when empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Even though they were all from the same town and spoke the same language, they began speaking in at least 15 different languages understood by thousands of non-believers who heard them.¹⁰ This miracle led the crowd to listen to Peter's explanation of the Gospel and resulted in 3,000 people being saved that day.¹¹

In addition, we see tongues being used as a gift to edify the church—the body of believers. A word of thanksgiving or prophecy can be given during church services if someone else has an interpretation of the tongue.¹² The interpretation is critical—otherwise, the word doesn't build up the church and unbelievers think those who speak in tongues are out of their minds.¹³

The other, and most common, purpose for tongues is as a personal prayer language between you and God.¹⁴ Paul writes of our spirits praying when we pray in tongues, *speaking in tongues more than you all, praying without ceasing, praying at all times in the Spirit, singing in the spirit,*¹⁵ and the Spirit *interceding for us with groanings too deep for words when we do not know what to pray.*¹⁶¹⁷¹⁸¹⁹²⁰

WHAT ABOUT THE GIFT OF TONGUES?

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul says that the Holy Spirit gives people different gifts. For example, to some, He gives healing, to another faith, and *to another, various kinds of tongues.*²¹ Then later he asks, rhetorically, *“All do not speak with tongues, do they?”*²² These verses are often interpreted to mean that speaking in tongues is a gift from the Spirit and that not every believer has this gift.

Speaking in tongues is always a gift from the Spirit. But a believer's access to the gift of

¹⁰ Acts 2:1-12

¹¹ Acts 2:41

¹² 1 Corinthians 14:13-17, 27-28

¹³ 1 Corinthians 14:4-5, 23

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 14:2, 18, 28

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 14:14

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 14:18

¹⁷ 1 Thessalonians 5:17

¹⁸ Ephesians 6:18

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 14:15, Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16

²⁰ Romans 8:26

²¹ 1 Corinthians 12:10

²² 1 Corinthians 12:30

tongues depends on which gift it is. For instance, every believer receives the gift of tongues as a prayer language when they place their faith in Jesus and invite the Holy Spirit to live within them. By virtue of the Holy Spirit living within you, you have the ability to speak with Him in His words. It's similar to the fruit of the Spirit—by virtue of the Spirit living within you, you have the ability to produce the fruit of the Spirit in ways you were unable to before you believed.²³

This gift is different from the gift of tongues spoken in front of a church (not as a personal prayer language but for corporate edification) and from the gift of tongues to evangelize non-believers. These gifts are not given to every believer.

It is also different from the gift of being able to speak in multiple other languages. Note that the “gift of tongues” Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians is “various kinds of tongues.” In other words, Paul isn't speaking of your one prayer language. He instead is referring to the ability to speak in *many* different languages. This gift also is not given to every believer.

For example, a student from my church, Bonnie, decided to spend a summer in Hong Kong sharing Jesus with youth on the streets. She did not know a word of Chinese before she went, but when she was there, she was able to speak—and understand—Chinese fluently. Day by day she was able to talk about difficult concepts like resurrection and eternal life without any difficulty. When she returned home, however, she wasn't able to talk in Chinese any more. This was an example of the gift of tongues Paul identified in 1 Corinthians.

WHY PRAY IN TONGUES?

Praying in tongues is one of the most effective forms of prayer that we have. Jude says that in praying in the Spirit, we *build ourselves up on our most holy faith and keep ourselves in the love of God.*²⁴ Praying in tongues strengthens us, edifies us, and enables us to persevere.

Also when we pray in the Spirit, we are speaking the word of God directly from God Himself. In Ephesians, the word of God is described as the sword of the Spirit in the armor of God.²⁵ It is the only part of the armor designed for offense rather than defense. Speaking in tongues—giving voice to the word of God from the Spirit within you—is a critical to effectively using the sword of the Spirit to fight our enemy. For example, praying in the Spirit is one of our most effective tools for deliverance (freedom from ways of living and thinking that aren't from Jesus): scripture says *where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom!*²⁶

Finally, praying in tongues is an extension of Jesus' *modus operandi* (m.o.). Jesus said that the words He spoke were not His, but the Father's--in other words, He let the Father speak

²³ Galatians 5:22-23

²⁴ Jude 1:20-21

²⁵ Ephesians 6:17

²⁶ 2 Corinthians 3:17

through Him.²⁷ He also said *He did not speak on His own authority; rather it was the Father living in Him who is doing His work.*²⁸ And again Jesus said *I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me a commandment as to what to say and what to speak...therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me.*²⁹

If we are going to live like Jesus, we also will let the Father speak through us. And when we speak in tongues, we, too, are hearing and saying the word of God. We're speaking what we hear the Spirit prompting us to speak, just like Jesus did. Praying in tongues is our forum for practicing hearing and speaking what God is saying. And the more we do it, the better able we are to hear, perceive, or discern the voice of the Lord.

OBSERVING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

1. In quiet prayer time with God, ask the Holy Spirit to hover over you and fill you. Focus on listening to God rather than thinking about what you want to say. Let your lips express whatever sound you hear whispered to your spirit. Speaking in tongues often starts small—as a syllable, word, or short phrase. It may be small, but it's a real word! And a full language will be developed and come forth from you.
2. While worshipping God in song, try singing in your spirit language. You can sing familiar songs and simply exchange English words for your spiritual words. You also can sing in your spiritual language to whatever tune comes to mind (referred to in the Bible as “singing a new song to the Lord”). Singing in tongues can be done while you're out in public—walking, shopping, or waiting in line. It resembles humming, and therefore seems more socially acceptable than spoken prayer (which sometimes can be perceived as talking to yourself).

²⁷ John 14:24

²⁸ John 14:10

²⁹ John 12:49-50