



ALL ABOUT SPEAKING IN

# TONGUES

1 COR 12 - 14

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Scripture references taken from the English Standard Version (ESV) Bible, unless otherwise stated.

“Tongues” or “speaking in tongues” is quite a divisive topic among Christians. Denominations have emerged surrounding this issue. Let’s try to understand why this is a divisive topic, the roots of various interpretations, and, more importantly, what the scripture actually teaches on this matter.

## 1. Where do Christians get the concept of “speaking in tongues” from?

The concept of speaking in tongues comes primarily from four sources within the Bible.

1. **Acts 2:1-13** – This passage records the first instance of Christians speaking in tongues. About 120 disciples were gathered in Jerusalem, and upon receiving the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, they spoke “in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance”.
2. **Acts 10:44-47** – This passage records Cornelius and other Gentiles gathered at his house receiving the Holy Spirit and “speaking in tongues and extolling God”.
3. **Acts 19:1-7** – This passage records how 12 disciples of John who were living in Ephesus received the Holy Spirit when the Apostle Paul laid his hands on them, and how they began “speaking in tongues and prophesying”.
4. **1 Corinthians 12-14** – These chapters delve into the theology of Spiritual gifts, in particular, the “gift of tongues”, including the gift of speaking in tongues and the gift of interpreting tongues.

## 2. What are “tongues” in the Bible?

### Definition:

The Greek root word translated as “tongues” in English Bible translations is “glóssa” (γλῶσσα). This word can refer to either the physical body organ, the tongue, or a language. We have the same concept in the English language as well. People often ask, “What is your mother tongue?”

Obviously, they are not inquiring about the other person’s mother’s organ, but rather about the other person’s native language.

The meaning of the Greek word “glóssa”, in the same manner, is determined by the context in which it is used.

It is worth noting that, along with English and Greek, Hebrew also has a word – “lashown” (לִשׁוֹן), which means both the organ of the tongue and language or speech.

Therefore, when the Bible refers to people speaking in tongues, it simply means people speaking in languages.

## Description:

### Tongues/Languages are a gift:

Languages are one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which he endows on believers, enabling them to speak in foreign languages that they have not learnt.

- **Acts 2:2-4** shows that the believers did nothing to gain the ability to speak in tongues. The Spirit filled them and enabled them to speak in other tongues. It was a work of the Holy Spirit.
- Similarly, **Acts 10:44-46** also shows that the Spirit was given freely to the Samaritan believers (by God) and the Spirit enabled them to speak in tongues.
- In **Acts 19:5-6**, the disciples of John heard the Gospel preached by Paul, believed it and were baptised into the name of Jesus. God, then, through the laying on of Paul's hands, freely gave the Holy Spirit to those disciples, and they began to speak in tongues.
- **1 Corinthians 12:4-11** makes it abundantly clear beyond any doubt that the ability to speak in tongues and/or interpret those tongues is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

### They are real human languages:

A plain, literal reading of the scripture in its context reveals that the biblical gift of tongues or languages always refers to real human languages.

Acts 2:1-13 makes it clear that the languages the disciples spoke were real human languages. Despite being Galileans who were unacquainted with any of the languages of the rest of the (known) world at that time, they spoke in the languages of the Hellenic Jews and Jews spread abroad elsewhere. The unbelieving hearers understood the speakers.

We can see that the accounts presented in Acts 10 and Acts 19 are identical. They too spoke in real human languages, which is why the hearers were amazed in Acts 10:45-46 that God chose to give the same gift (and consequently, the same spirit) to the Samaritans too!

In 1 Corinthians 14:6-11, the Apostle Paul, in setting the record straight about the spiritual gift of languages and correcting the erroneous views the Corinthians had, linked this gift to real human languages – “there are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning...”.

This has always been the understanding of the Church. Consider the writings of some of the early church leaders:

**Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329–390):** *“They spoke with foreign tongues, and not those of their native land; and the wonder was great, a language spoken by those who had not learned it. And the sign is to them that believe not, and not to them that believe, that it may be an accusation of the unbelievers, as it is written, “With other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people, and not even so will they listen to Me” says the Lord”* (The Oration on Pentecost, 15–17).

**John Chrysostom (c. 344–407),** commenting on 1 Cor. 14:1–2: *“And as in the time of building the tower [of Babel] the one tongue was divided into many; so then the many tongues frequently met in one man, and the same person used to discourse both in the Persian, and the Roman, and the Indian, and many other tongues, the Spirit sounding within him: and the gift was called the gift of tongues because he could all at once speak divers languages”* (Homilies on First Corinthians, 35.1).

**Augustine (354–430):** *“In the earliest times, ‘the Holy Ghost fell upon them that believed: and they spoke with tongues,’ which they had not learned, ‘as the Spirit gave them utterance.’ These were signs adapted to the time. For it was necessary for there to be that sign of the Holy Spirit in all tongues, to show that the Gospel of God was to run through all tongues over the whole earth”* (Homilies on the First Epistle of John, 6.10).

Notice how the Early church fathers treated the gift of languages mentioned in Acts 2 and the gift of languages mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12-14 as being one and the same – the gift of speaking real human languages that are foreign to the speaker.

**A quick note about referencing the writings of the early Church Fathers:** *They, too, were men just like us. They were not infallible. Not everything they believed or wrote is true or correct. They, too, like virtually everyone else, had their biases and had extra-biblical influences on them. So, just because an early Church Father wrote it, doesn’t mean it’s correct. However, especially for topics like this, whose interpretation requires a good understanding of the context in which they were written, it is quite helpful to see how the early Christians who lived closer to the events understood them.*

### **3. Where then does the idea of speaking in angelic languages/non-human languages come from?**

As I showed above, the early church universally believed that those who received the gift of languages spoke in real human languages. So, when did this view change? What led to the current state of Christianity, where a significant portion of Christians around the world believe that the gift of tongues allows them to speak in non-human languages?

We can trace the origins of this new idea not to any exegetical study of Scripture, but to the foundations of the Pentecostal movement from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s. This was a period of social, political, class and racial struggles and turmoil in the United States. Those turmoils led to discontentment among many middle-class, poor and marginalised Americans with the mainline churches and denominations. Many denounced the existing denominations and sought new revivals and revelations from God, which is why one can trace the origins of several new Christian denominations and cults to this period! The Holiness Revival movement of the late nineteenth century is one of the new (and significant) religious movements of that period.

People from various denominational backgrounds, including Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians, who denounced the impiety of their churches and advocated for a theology of perfection, believed that God was ushering in a new era. They believed that they were experiencing a “renewed outpouring of the Holy Spirit, much like the early church experienced in the book of Acts. The holiness revival spawned zeal for “Spirit Baptism” (a divine empowerment of believers) and for other gifts of the New Testament church, such as healing and prophecy. Holiness leaders such as Charles Cullis, John Alexander Dowie, and Albert B. Simpson established healing missions across the U.S. They, like other holiness advocates, believed a new, miraculous era of the spirit was occurring, which would end in the second coming of Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

One of those Holiness ministers was Charles F. Parham. He claimed to have attained a state of perfection and therefore became an apostle of God.<sup>2</sup> He essentially became the founder of the New Apostolic movement<sup>3</sup> and the Pentecostal movement. He took the belief of the Holiness movement in “Spirit Baptism” and the restoration of New Testament gifts a step further. It is hard to cover all the theological holes, abuses, and heresies of the Holiness movement here, but suffice it to point out the erroneous and unbiblical belief that people can receive “Spirit Baptism” separate from and subsequent to their conversion. Building upon this erroneous belief, Charles Parham developed another unbiblical teaching: that speaking in tongues is THE confirmation of the Holy Spirit’s baptism.<sup>4</sup>

So began the obsession with the “gift of tongues”. Parham’s schools and congregations were most known for their emphasis on the gift of tongues. Consider these quotes from the News articles around that time:

*“But the really strange feature of the faith is the so called “gift of tongue from heaven.””<sup>5</sup>*

*“Then he founded the Apostolic Faith, and one of the manifestations of some power was the endowment of some of his followers with the “unknown tongue””<sup>6</sup>*

*“...Rev. Charles Parham of Topeka, the man who speaks and teaches “the unknown tongue”...”<sup>7</sup>*

It must be noted that Charles Parham himself, at the start of this newly founded apostolic movement, firmly believed that these tongues will be **real human languages, much like the languages the disciples spoke in the book of Acts**. Consider, for example, the advertisement/article in The Topeka Daily Capital newspaper on 20 June 1901 for the Parham School of Tongues:

*“The summer term of one month at the Parham School of Tongues will open on June 30. The school of tongues is located one mile west of Washburn college at the place known as Stone’s Folly. Here the disciples of Charles F. Parham are instructed in a course of Bible study during which they are said **to acquire a knowledge of all living languages...**”<sup>8</sup>*

Consider this contextual information presented in another article in the same newspaper (21 Sept 1907) while covering the news of Parham being accused in the case of torturing an old woman to death in the name of exorcising demons:

*“Charles F. Parham will be remembered by Topeka people in the early part of his career as a religious fanatic. Something less than ten years ago he came here and started a school at the old house, now burned, west of Washburn College, known as Stone’s Folly. **He attracted considerable attention at the time by having his pupils get the “gift of tongues”, claiming they were able to talk in any language without having studied it...**”<sup>9</sup>*

Consider yet another article from 18 Jan 1902:

*“The Rev. Charles E. Parham, who conducted the school of tongues in Topeka a year ago... The Gift of Tongues, it will be remembered, was attained by the believers through the simple medium of prayer. No study was required to become acquired of the ability to use any language known to any age of mankind...”<sup>10</sup>*

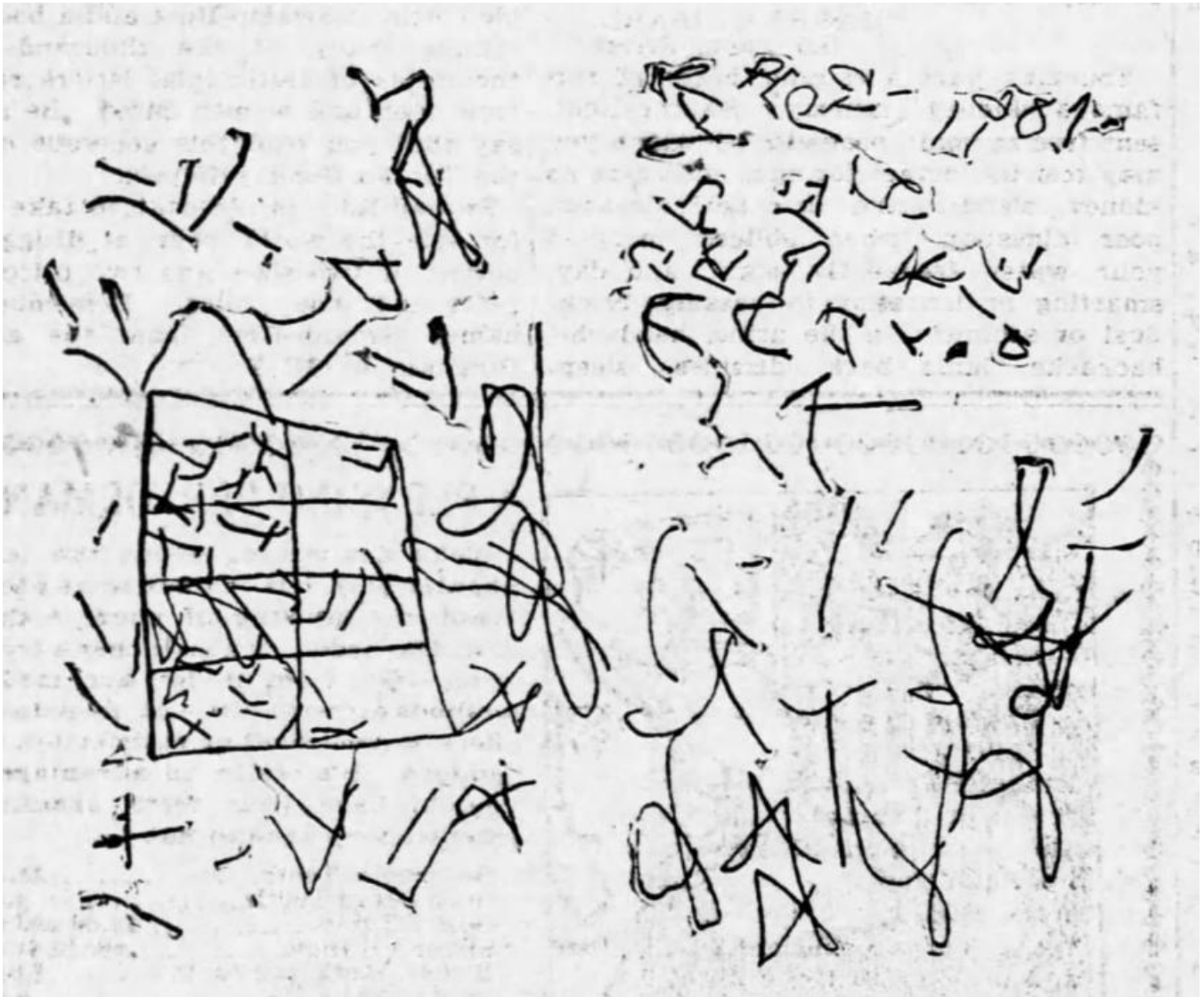
Yet another article, this time from the Hawaiian Gazette (31 May 1901):

*“His (Charles Parham’s) plan is to send among the heathen, persons who have been blessed with the “gift of tongues” – a gift which, he says, no others have ever had conferred upon them since apostolic times. His missionaries, as he points out, will have the great advantages of having the **languages of the various peoples among whom they work miraculously conferred upon them**, and will not be put to the trouble of learning them in the laborious way by which they are acquired by other prospective missionaries.*

The same article quotes Mr. Parham saying the following, while talking about his summer school:

*“There is no doubt that at this time they will have conferred on them the ‘gift of tongues’ if they are worthy and seek it in faith, believing. **They will thus be made able to talk to the people whom they choose to work among in their own language**, which will, of course, be an inestimable advantage. **“The students of Bethel College do not need to study in the old way to learn the languages. They have them conferred upon them miraculously. Different ones have already been enabled to converse with Spaniards, Italians, Bohemians, Hungarians, Germans, and French in their own language. I have no doubt that knowledge of Chinese, Japanese, the various dialects of the people of India and even the language of the savages of Africa will be received during our meeting in the same way. I expect this gathering to be the greatest since the days of Pentecost.”**<sup>11</sup>*

Parham’s disciples not only spoke in what they believed were real foreign languages but also wrote in them! Agnes Ozman (or sometimes cited as Ms. Auswin) was the first of Parham’s disciples to have received this ‘gift of tongues’. She supposedly spoke and wrote in Chinese<sup>12</sup>. A copy of her handwritten note (Supposedly Chinese) is shown on the following page:



*Figure 1: Miss Auswin's (Agnes Ozman's) handwriting. Miss Auswin and the rest of Parham's disciples believed that this was Chinese and that she was able to miraculously write this due to the gift of tongues.*

While Parham and his disciples firmly believed that God was giving them the gift of speaking and writing in real human languages, the reality was, unfortunately, much different. Anyone with any familiarity with the Chinese script can immediately tell that Miss Auswin's scribbles are not Chinese. They are just meaningless scribbles. Similarly, the supposed languages they spoke were also meaningless utterances and were not real languages.



Consider the words of charismatic authors Jack Hayford and David Moore:

*“Sadly, the idea of xenoglossalallic tongues [i.e. foreign languages] would later prove an embarrassing failure as Pentecostal workers went off to mission fields with their gift of tongues and found their hearers did not understand them.” (The Charismatic Century, 42).*

A report from Robert Anderson:

*“S. C. Todd of the Bible Missionary Society investigated eighteen Pentecostals who went to Japan, China, and India “expecting to preach to the natives in those countries in their own tongue,” and found that by their own admission “in no single instance have [they] been able to do so.” As these and other missionaries returned in disappointment and failure, Pentecostals were compelled to rethink their original view of speaking in tongues.” (Robert M. Anderson, Vision of the Disinherited, 90–91)*

When the passionate evangelists and early adherents of Pentecostalism realised that the “tongues” they were speaking and writing in were not real human languages, they did what many Christians do when their firmly held beliefs and lived experiences do not align with the scripture – hold on to their experiences and reject the exegetical understanding of the Scripture. They could not accept the fact that what they were experiencing was not from God and that it was not the Biblical gift of languages. So, they solved the problem by concluding that God must have been giving them non-human languages. This led to the popularisation of the idea that the gift of tongues includes angelic languages. Today, no matter where I look, those are the only “tongues” I can find in the Church!

I acknowledge that there are testimonies from various missionaries about how God miraculously enabled them to speak foreign languages in the mission field. Our God is a providential and miraculous God. He can absolutely choose to bless some Christians with the ability to speak the local languages in their mission fields today, if he wishes to. I do not see any problem with that. However, any such miraculous provision is not the same as the Spiritual Gift of languages mentioned in the Bible. I will explain more about that towards the end of this article.

It is also worth noting that none of those accounts have been independently verified or authenticated. They are merely anecdotal accounts. Now, that does not mean those accounts are false. It just means that we can’t be sure about their authenticity.

## 4. Does not the Bible teach that there are languages of angels?

At this point, any careful student of the Scripture would say, “Hold on! Does not 1 Corinthians 13:1 teach that believers can (receive the gift of and) speak in the languages of angels? Does not 1 Corinthians 14:2 teach that no one can understand a person who speaks through the gift of languages? If the languages gifted by the Spirit are always human languages, how then can the scripture say that no one can understand them? Do these verses not teach that the gift of languages can include non-human languages?”

The simple answer is “No, not if you read those verses in their right context”. Let’s carefully examine those verses one by one, in their context:

### Context:

The Apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, addressed a series of serious problems within that Church. The entire letter was intended to rectify the situation within the Church. It is filled with rebuke and corrections. We should keep this in mind as we read through the book of 1 Corinthians to gain a proper understanding of it. In chapter 12, he begins addressing the issue of Spiritual Gifts, with the issue of “tongues” being his primary focus.

### Exposition:

*"Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed." 1 Corinthians 12:1*

The phrase “now concerning” in this letter to the Corinthians indicates that Paul is about to discuss a new topic, one that was previously raised by the Corinthian delegation. So, we know that the Corinthians asked Paul some questions about spiritual gifts, and he’s about to answer them here.

His very first opening statement for this section is “I do not want you to be uninformed,” or, in other words, “I don’t want you to be ignorant or naive, I want you to know the truth about spiritual gifts”. This shows that the Corinthians were, at least in part, uninformed or misinformed about Spiritual Gifts.

*"You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led." 1 Corinthians 12:2*

This verse is one of the key verses for understanding the entire section, yet it is often given very little treatment by most commentators (that I have read). Paul was reminding them of their life before they were saved. In particular, he was concerned with the fact that they were *led* astray to

mute idols; *however, they were led*. So, what was Paul doing here? Why was he suddenly talking about their former way of living? What did that have to do with them understanding the issue of Spiritual Gifts properly? One thing we can be certain of is that it is definitely relevant to the rest of the discussion on Spiritual Gifts. Otherwise, Paul wouldn't have mentioned it here. The next verse starts with "therefore", making it quite clear that verse 2 holds the key to understanding verse 3 and beyond. So, what is the relevance of the pre-conversion, pagan lives of the Corinthians to understanding Spiritual Gifts?

An investigation into pagan worship practices can provide the answer to this question.

Pagan "worship" is often characterised by debauchery, sensuality, sexual immorality, orgies, and ecstatic experiences. This is a universal statement encompassing pagan worship across the world, from the ancient Greco-Roman world, where Corinth was situated, to India, Scandinavia, and Japan. It is not my intent to discuss all aspects of this pagan worship in this article. We will merely focus on the ecstatic experiences in pagan worship.

Consider these quotes from Barbara Ehrenreich's 'Dancing in the Streets' book<sup>13</sup>:

*"Dances to Artemis were known to be especially wild in Sparta – though whether in a religious or sexual sense we do not know, only that women and girls danced wearing 'only one chiton (loose garment)'..."*

*"This god, source of both ecstasy and terror, was Dionysus, or, as he was known to the Romans, Bacchus. His mundane jurisdiction covered vineyards and wine, but his more spiritual responsibility was to preside over the orgeia (literally, rites performed in the forest at night...) where his devotees **danced themselves into a state of trance.**"*

*"Women, above all, responded to Dionysus's call. In fact, the association between the god and his band of female devotees is so strong that it's worth underscoring the fact that men also worshipped him, whether at village festivals to celebrate the new wine or by piously getting drunk together in honor of the god."*

*“The most notorious feminine form of Dionysian worship, the... winter dance, looks to modern eyes like a crude pantomime of feminist revolt. In mythical accounts, women “called” by the god to participate drop their spinning and abandon their children to run outdoors and into the mountains, where they dress in fawn skins and engage in a “frenzied dance.” These maenads, as Dionysus’s female cult members were called, run through the woods calling out the name of the god, **or uttering the characteristic bacchic cry they toss their hair...** Finally, they achieve a state of mind the Greeks called having the god within oneself—or what many cultures in our own time would call a “possession trance.”*

The Corinthians would have been well accustomed to this form of frenzied, ecstatic worship, involving the worshippers getting into a trance-like state and uttering mysterious speech under the influence of that “possession”, not the least because of the presence of the temple of Aphrodite, the daughter of Dynosisus, in Corinth.

Similar ecstatic “worship” practices have existed and continue to this day in various forms of Hinduism in India. Consider the following explanations and word pictures from Maheswari, a Shaivite, who writes on Medium (I can attest to the validity of these explanations based on my personal observations growing up in India):<sup>14</sup>

*“While mainstream religion teaches us to worship the divine in temples and images, a quieter, older tradition runs like fire through the veins of Tantra, Bhakti, and folk ritual — a tradition where the body becomes the temple, and the deity enters as a living, erotic, ecstatic force. This is the path of sacred possession.”*

*“In the ritual performance of Theyyam, a practitioner undergoes intense austerity and preparation to become a deity... Once in makeup and costume, he is no longer addressed by name. Villagers worship him as the deity itself. **He speaks in trance, blesses devotees, delivers oracles.** “It is not acting,” a Theyyam performer once said. **“When the makeup is complete, the god arrives. I don’t know where I go.”** The audience doesn’t see performance. They see **possession.**”*

*“In Tamil folk theatre, certain performers are ‘mounted’ by deities mid-performance. Lines not in the script are uttered, the body moves strangely, and spectators may receive messages or healing.”*

*“In Kaula Tantra, especially among the Kapalikas and Trika Shaivites, **the body is** not just a temple — it is **the field of divine play** (lila-kṣetra). Through rituals like Deity Nyāsa (installing the goddess in the body), Kundalini awakening (Shakti rising from the base chakra), and **Mahābhāva (ecstatic emotional trance)**, the **practitioner allows the goddess or god to “ride” them, as a lover would.** This is not possession as pathology. **This is possession as yoga — union.**”*

Many more references can be provided for such ecstatic worship experiences where people feel that they are “possessed” by the deities, or “carried away” into an ecstatic or trance-like state. This often involves ecstatic speech as shown in the examples above. While it’s difficult to provide videographic evidence of the cultic practices of the worshippers of Dynosius, I can provide some videos that show the Indian religious rituals involving “poonakam”, wherein the deity (often a goddess) possesses the devotees. They get into a frenzy and utter ecstatic speech (see the YouTube video links below).

Link for Video 1:



Link for Video 2:



Link for Video 3:



Link for Video 4:



What makes these experiences quite interesting is that many of the women (and men) who receive this “poonakam” are generally quiet and reserved individuals. They become a completely different person as they are taken over by the deity they are worshipping.

Now, with this background in mind, let’s come back to 1 Corinthians 12:2, where the Apostle Paul says, “You know that when you were pagans **you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led.**”

So, he was reminding them that they had been led astray to worship mute idols in the past – either because of peer pressure or their own emotional weakness, or because of the music and ambience that led them into a trance, or because they were possessed by the demons whom they worshipped. During those times, they believed that it was worship. They thought that the ecstasy they were experiencing was a result of the union with the spirit of their god. Therefore, they treated the ecstatic speakers with respect. No matter how weird or ridiculous the person may have sounded, one would not have ventured to mock, question, or judge them, because the person was “speaking under the influence of the spirit of god” that possessed him or her. This explains verse 3.

In 1 Corinthians 12:3, we see that the Corinthian Church had some people who claimed to be speaking “in the Spirit of God”, and said things like “Jesus is Anathema (accursed)”! If that were a congregation of Jewish believers, they would have rightfully branded those men as blasphemers and put them out of the Church, or at least, taken them aside to correct them and teach them the truth. However, the Corinthians could not do that because of the reasons we discussed above. It appears that many in that congregation were afraid of sharply dismissing those “believers” who were anathemizing Jesus, because who knows? Perhaps those people were indeed speaking “in the Spirit of God”. After all, when a person speaks “in the spirit”, according to their past pagan beliefs, anything goes. You don’t question the oracles and ecstatic speech coming from the mouth of the person speaking “in spirit”. So, some of the more mature Corinthians, who can clearly see a problem with those sayings, wrote to Paul asking for clarification and guidance, and hence this reply.

Now piece all these three verses together. Paul is saying, and I paraphrase, “Corinthians, regarding the question you asked about spiritual gifts, know this: In the past, in your worship, you were led astray to mute idols in various ways. During those times, you believed that every word coming from the ecstatically frenzied “worshipper” was a spiritual utterance. Do not bring those same beliefs into the Church! If a person is truly speaking in the Spirit of God, he/she will never curse Jesus!

This provides further context regarding the state of Corinthian confusion about speaking in the Holy Spirit.

In verses 4-11, he explains the purpose of Spiritual gifts and how one should treat them. As we go through these verses, keep in mind that this is a corrective letter. The reason for this section, again, is to correct their incorrect understanding.

In 1 Corinthians 12:7, he explains the purpose of the spiritual gifts:

*"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."*

The Corinthians were self-absorbed, arrogant and prideful. They turned everything about themselves. They were saying “all things are lawful to us (as Christians)” and were engaging in prostitution (1 Corinthians 6:12-20), a characteristic feature of their former pagan worship. Claiming to have superior knowledge, they engaged in idolatry (1 Corinthians 10:14-22). Being so puffed up with their “knowledge”, they ignored the weaker brothers in the church and led them into sin (1 Corinthians 8). Claiming “lawfulness”, they sought their own good and did not care for others (1 Corinthians 10:23-24). They brought the debauchery and drunkenness of Dionysus to the Lord’s supper. They ate and got Drunk at Church, instead of taking part in the Lord’s supper together with a sober mind (1 Corinthians 11:20-22, 33). In all areas of their lives, especially in the context of the Church, instead of doing everything for the glory of God and the benefit of others, they did everything for their own glory and benefit.

The same attitude permeated the Corinthian church, even when it came to the reverence, reception, and use of spiritual gifts. They turned the Spiritual Gifts into tools for their own “building up”. They sought after gifts that would elevate them and make them look special. We will see more about that in the later verses. Paul, therefore, sets the record straight here. **Spiritual gifts are NOT for the purpose of building oneself up. Spiritual gifts are administered by the Spirit to individual members of the body of Christ “for the common good”.**

Paul uses the analogy of a human body from verses 12 through to the end of chapter 12 to make the point even clearer. Hands don’t exist for themselves. Legs and ears don’t exist for their own sake. No organ is made for itself. Instead, each organ is formed and placed in the body to enable the whole body to function correctly. Similarly, **no spiritual gift is given to any believer for their own sake; instead, each believer is given a spiritual gift (or gifts) by the Holy Spirit so that they can use those gifts to serve the Church.**

In 1 Corinthians 12:31, Paul states that some gifts are “higher” than others, and he encourages the Corinthians to seek the higher gifts. Later in Chapter 14, he explains why “Prophecy” is the higher gift and why Christians should seek that gift over the gift of languages. He ends chapter 12 by saying, seek the higher gifts and “I will show you a still more excellent way.”

In chapter 13, he explains what this “still more excellent way” is. It’s the pursuit of Love! The entirety of the Law is summed up in this: Love God and love your neighbour (Mark 12:30-

31; Romans 13:9-13). Jesus told his disciples, “By your love will the world know that you are my disciples” (John 13:35), and “if you love me, you will keep my commandment. My commandment is that you love one another” (John 14:15; 15:12-13). The New Testament is filled with similar exhortations, such as “let all things be done in love” (1 Corinthians 16:14); “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” (Philippians 2:3) and “Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.” (Romans 15:2) among others.

Paul expands on this teaching in 1 Corinthians 13, telling the Corinthians that if their actions are not motivated by love, then everything they do is useless.

*"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing." (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)*

Paul is using hyperbole here. He is exaggerating and taking things to the extreme to make his point. In verse two, he begins with “if I have prophetic powers”, which is nothing spectacular, given that he was an apostle AND the Spirit gives the gift of Prophecy to many in the Church. He then moves to the extreme – “and understand **all** mysteries and **all** knowledge, and if I have **all** faith, so as to remove mountains... if I give away **all** I have, and if I deliver up my body **to be burned**, but have not love, I gain **nothing**.” Obviously, neither Paul nor anybody else ever lived understood **ALL** mysteries or possessed **ALL** knowledge, had **ALL** faith, and so on... I am confident that Paul did not know much about Quantum Mechanics or coronaviruses. His point is simply this: even if I have all of that, even if I could do all of that, if I don’t have love, I am nothing; I gain nothing. It is in this context, in verse 1, that he says, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels”. Therefore, an appropriate understanding of this verse should be that the reference to “languages or tongues of angels” is a hyperbolic statement. It does not mean that one could speak in the languages of angels, much like his statements in verse 2 onwards do not imply that there can be people who can understand all mysteries and all knowledge. For all we know, there is no evidence of any angelic language in the scripture. Every time the angels spoke in the Bible, they spoke in human languages. Therefore, it is inappropriate to read this verse to mean that the gift of languages includes the ability to speak in angelic languages.

Paul then proceeds to say this in chapter 14:

*"1 Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. 2 For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. 3 On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. 4 The one who speaks in a tongue builds up*



*himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. 5 Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up." (1 Corinthians 14:1-5)*

Pentecostals and other Charismatics often use verse 2 of Chapter 14 to justify the unintelligible speech they utter in the name of speaking in tongues. They say, "See, verse 2 says, "no one understands a person who speaks in tongues" and that such a person speaks not to men but to God. So, the reason why my "tongues speaking" is unintelligible to you is because I am speaking mysteries in the Spirit and only God can understand me". Again, let's read that verse in its context and form our theology in light of all scripture passages that discuss this issue, rather than relying on one isolated verse taken out of context.

We know with absolute certainty that when 1 Corinthians 14:2 says, "no one understands him", it does NOT mean that nobody ever, anywhere on the planet, because when the disciples spoke in foreign languages in Acts 2, thousands of Jews from foreign nations understood them! Paul is talking about "no one understanding" a person who is speaking a foreign language in the context of the Corinthian church. Why does no one understand those languages in the Corinthian church? It's simple, because the Corinthian congregation does not speak those languages! If I go to a rural Church in China and start speaking in Hindi, no one there will understand me. If I go to a church in a South Indian village and speak in Swahili, no one will understand me. Paul says the same in 1 Corinthians 14:10-11:

*"There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me." (1 Corinthians 14:10-11)*

So, God knew what the speaker was saying because God understands all languages. Nobody in the Corinthian church could understand what he was saying because they did not know the language he was speaking. When we can't understand the language, their speech remains a mystery to us. It is in this sense that a person speaking in a foreign language "speaks not to men but to God and no one understands him because he is uttering mysteries in the Spirit." As 1 Cor 14:3 says, "On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation." Why? Because that person speaks in their local language and brings out the profound truths of God to them.

Paul then proceeds to say this in 1 Corinthians 14:4:

*"The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church."*

Many Pentecostals and Charismatics use this verse to claim that the gift of tongues they received is for them to use in private, for their own building-up or edification. It's a private prayer language, they say. They claim that when they pray and/or speak in tongues in private, it builds them up spiritually, draws them closer to God, and fills them with peace and God's presence.

Again, context is essential. Our theology must not be based on isolated verses, but instead on Scripture as a whole. We have already seen in 1 Corinthians 12:7 that Spiritual Gifts are given NOT for personal edification but for the edification of the Church. Paul spends that entire chapter making that point. Gifts are not for the individuals to build themselves up. Gifts are solely for the purpose of serving the Body. In light of this clear revelation of the Scripture about the purpose of the Spiritual Gifts, it is inappropriate to approach 1 Corinthians 14:4 and conclude that God gives the gift of languages for personal edification.

Firstly, the verse itself does not use such language. The verse states that the person speaking in a foreign language builds himself up; it does not say that that's what God gave them the gift for. Secondly, given what is well established about the Corinthians in the prior chapters, the "building up of oneself" mentioned in this verse is best understood as a negative statement. We have already seen that the Corinthians were self-absorbed and did everything for their own glory. We noticed the same pattern repeating with the issue of Spiritual Gifts as well. They were eager for the manifestations of the Spirit, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:12, but they were not eager for just any manifestation of the Spirit. They were not eager for the Spirit's manifestation through the gifts of helping, administering, prophesying, or teaching, but they were quite eager to receive the gift of languages. It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that this fascination of the Corinthians with the gift of languages was because it gave the speaker a special status. It has a mystical element to it that puts others in awe of the speaker. We can understand this, don't we? No one will be in awe of a person in church who quietly puts the chairs away and sweeps the floors. People won't flock to see them, but if a person in your church today suddenly starts speaking fluently in German, Hindi, Mandarin, and all sorts of world languages that they never learnt, that person will be instantly famous. So, the Corinthians, unsurprisingly, sought the gift of languages, because it builds them up. Therefore, the building up of oneself, in this context, is best understood to mean gaining prominence and glory.

There is another reason why the argument that speaking or praying in mystical, angelic, or unknown languages in one's private prayer life "edifies" them and draws them closer to God is flawed. Paul directly states in later verses that it does not help any individual to draw closer to God! In 1 Cor 14:14, he says, "For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful." So, unless the person with the gift of foreign languages also has the gift of interpreting those languages, praying or speaking in languages is of no value to them. That person's mind remains unfruitful and unedified. That's why in verse 13 he says, "Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue

should pray that he may interpret.” He expands more on this topic in verse 15. He says our prayers and songs should be intelligible. Otherwise, we will remain unfruitful or unedified.

Furthermore, nowhere else in the Scripture do we see support for this idea that one can be drawn closer to God by speaking in unknown languages. The Bible explains that we get closer to God and become more like him through our sufferings (Romans 5: 2-6), by abiding in Christ (John 15:4), How do we abide in Christ? by keeping his commandments (John 15:10), by practising and immersing in the public reading of Scripture, exhortation, teaching, and setting all believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity (1 Timothy 4:12-15) and so on. The scripture also teaches us that if we make our requests known to God through prayer and supplication with thanksgiving in everything, we will receive His peace that surpasses all understanding (Philippians 4:6-7). So, the argument that privately uttering unintelligible speech edifies believers (makes them more Christlike) is unbiblical and unsupported by any biblical text.

Let’s continue with our exposition of the text. In 1 Corinthians 14:16-17, he stresses the point again that the purpose of gifts and ALL our actions in the Church is and shall be the edification of the body of Christ. If our gifts and/or actions do not edify the Church, we shall cease them.

*"I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. 19 Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue." (1 Corinthians 14:18-19)*

Some people use the above verses to argue that the gift of languages is for “private” use. They come to this conclusion because Paul says that although he can speak in foreign languages more than all of the Corinthians, in church, he would rather speak five words in the local language to instruct others. He can speak in many languages, but he prefers not to use them in church. So, where does he speak? Paul didn’t say that he speaks in those languages in private. That is a desperate attempt to read into the text. If we continue reading (verses 20-25), we will gain insight into where he might have spoken in all those languages.

*"20 Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. 21 In the Law it is written, “By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.” 22 Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers." (1 Corinthians 14:20-22)*

Verse 20 is identical to 1 Corinthians 12:1. Paul is exhorting the Corinthian believers not to be naive. He wants them to be well-informed about the Scripture. In verses 21 and 22, he explains the purpose of the gift of languages. Among all the spiritual gifts, the gift of languages has a unique specialty. While the rest of the gifts are intended to build up the body of Christ into Christlikeness, the gift of languages was primarily to serve as a sign for unbelievers who were either drawn to the

Church or to whom the Church went with its gospel message. Also, when it says, languages are a sign for unbelievers, it isn't talking about all the unbelievers in all of the world, but for the unbelieving Jews! The gift of languages was given to the early Christians to fulfil the prophecy given by the Lord **to the Jews**, as explained in verse 21. So, Paul, I'm sure, would have spoken in various languages, through this gift, to the Jews living in all the areas he travelled to, not privately in his bedroom.

Quick note – Remember, earlier in this article, I talked about the anecdotal testimonies of modern-day missionaries who are enabled by God to speak in foreign languages? I said that even if those accounts are reliable, such supernatural enabling is not the same as the gift of languages. Do you now understand why? The Spiritual Gift of languages in the Bible was given to empower the Church to fulfil God's prophecy to the Jews, not primarily for the sake of mission work across the world.

This then explains why the gift of tongues had faded away already by the second and third centuries. The Church, in God's great redemptive plan, moved from the Jewish epicentre to the Gentiles. God had brought upon the Jews a temporary hardening of hearts so that the Gospel could go outwards. As the church expanded, there was a gradual decrease in the Jewish presence within the church or its vicinity. Therefore, there was no more need for the gift of languages in the Church, and it faded away. That's why the early Church Fathers cited at the start of this article spoke of the gift of languages as a thing of the past, not as a continuing phenomenon.

However, since, at the time of writing this letter, the gift of languages was still being distributed by the Holy Spirit, Paul went on to give instructions in 1 Corinthians 14:16-33, explaining how that gift should be exercised in the Church. He again emphasised the purpose of gifts in verse 26, saying, "let all things be done for building up (of the Church)".

## 5. Conclusion

1. The gift of languages is a gift of the Holy Spirit.
2. The gift of languages enabled the person with the gift to speak in real, human languages that he/she did not learn.
3. The gift of languages was not intended for private use, but rather for the edification of others.
4. It did not enable believers to speak angelic languages.
5. It was given to early Christians for the purpose of fulfilling the prophecy against Israel and to act as a sign for the unbelieving Jews that God is now moving from them to the Gentile world.
6. Therefore, the modern Pentecostal "tongues" are unbiblical.

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