WP-14 FAITH IN PRACTICE

Praying in Tongues

STATEMENT

Praying in tongues is one of the nine manifestations of the Holy Spirit. It is spirit-to-Spirit prayer that the believer chooses to start and stop, that goes beyond the speaker's understanding, and that Scripture tells Christians to desire, practice privately and not forbid.

Read time **7 min** Sources & resources **7** Series **Faith in Practice** Author **Lee Gregory**

01 ABSTRACT

Few Christian practices draw a stronger reaction than speaking in tongues. Roughly a quarter of the world's Christians belong to pentecostal or charismatic movements that practice it, while many others have been taught it ended with the apostles. This paper works directly from Scripture, chiefly 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, to answer five questions: what the gift is, where it comes from, who it is for, what it does and how it works in practice. It closes with the most common objections and a response to each.

02 WHAT THE WORD "GIFT" MEANS

Paul lists nine gifts, or manifestations, of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12:7–11, including "the ability to speak in unknown languages" and "the ability to interpret what is being said." The Greek word is **charisma** (plural **charismata**, Strong's G5486): a divine gratuity, a spiritual endowment, a miraculous faculty. The same word is translated "free gift" in Romans 5:15–16 and "gift of God" in Romans 6:23. A charisma is not earned or manufactured. It is received.

Paul's point in chapter 12 is the source: "It is the one and only Spirit who distributes all these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have" (12:11). The Christian's role is to be a willing participant.

03 HOW THE SPIRIT LEADS

Before coming to Christ, Paul's readers were "led astray and swept along in worshiping speechless idols" (12:2). They responded to inner impulses from a spiritual source. The Holy Spirit also leads by impulse: a desire, a burden, a gut feeling, a prompting of conscience. Verse 3 gives the test for the source. We are never forced or overpowered by the Spirit of God; we receive a leading and choose whether to act (Romans 8:5–8). Paul ends the chapter telling believers to "earnestly desire and zealously cultivate the greatest and best gifts and graces" (12:31, AMPC). Any Christian may pursue any gift, and one who never desires a gift should not expect to be used in it.

04 WHAT TONGUES IS

Speaking in tongues, praying in tongues and praying in the Spirit are names for one gift. It is not a language the speaker has learned or understands. It is direct spiritual communication: "you will be talking only to God, since people won't be able to

understand you. You will be speaking by the power of the Spirit, but it will all be mysterious" (1 Corinthians 14:2). At Pentecost, hearers understood in their own native languages (Acts 2:4–12); Paul also speaks of "the languages of earth and of angels" (13:1). Either way, the content comes from the Spirit, not the speaker's intellect: "my spirit is praying, but I don't understand what I am saying" (14:14).

As with salvation, the believer must physically speak, but the heart and the act of faith carry the significance, not the sounds. The laying on of hands works the same way (Acts 8:17; 1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6; Hebrews 6:2): a physical act, joined to faith, producing a spiritual result. Any physical sensation is on par with receiving salvation, sometimes strong, often none at all.

05 THE SPEAKER IS IN CONTROL

"People who prophesy are in control of their spirit and can take turns" (14:32). Paul's rules for church meetings (two or three speakers, one at a time, only with an interpreter; otherwise "speak in tongues to God privately," 14:27–28) only make sense if the speaker can start and stop at will. The first brain-imaging study of people praying in tongues (University of Pennsylvania, 2006) is consistent with this: the speaker chooses to begin, but the usual language centers are not under the speaker's control, matching Acts 2:4, "as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability."

06 WHAT PRAYING IN TONGUES DOES

PURPOSE	SCRIPTURE
Speaking to God and worshiping in spirit	1 Corinthians 14:2, 14:15; John 4:24
Building up the believer	1 Corinthians 14:4
Building faith	Jude 1:20
Praying when we don't know what to pray	Romans 8:26–27
Instructing the church, when interpreted	1 Corinthians 14:5, 14:27–28
Reaching people in their own language	Acts 2:4–12
A sign to unbelievers	1 Corinthians 14:21–22 (Isaiah 28:11–12)

07 HOW IT WORKS IN PRACTICE

The prompting. The believer voices sounds he does not understand, trusting that the Holy Spirit is praying, interceding or edifying. The prompting is usually a burden, desire or gut feeling. At other times he simply wants the benefit of a perfect prayer and begins in faith, to "fan into flames the spiritual gift God gave you" (2 Timothy 1:6).

Interpretation. Sometimes the Spirit gives the speaker or someone else the meaning, and it is spoken in the hearers' language.

Most often there is no interpretation, and the believer's spirit is simply praying to God. That does not diminish the gift; it widens the opportunity to use it.

Mostly private. Without an interpreter, tongues belongs "to God privately" (14:28), echoing Jesus: "shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private" (Matthew 6:6). In public, uninterpreted tongues will make visitors "think you are crazy" (14:23). Like tithing, it is an unnatural act of faith that yields supernatural results.

Back and forth. "I will pray in the spirit, and I will also pray in words I understand" (14:15). While praying in tongues, people or situations come to mind; the believer prays for them with understanding, then returns to tongues until the burden lifts or he chooses to stop.

08 AUTHOR'S EXPERIENCE

I have seen interpreted tongues in a gathering of believers a few times, but my own experience is mainly in private prayer, where it happens often. It works more as a prayer director than as special knowledge. While I am praying in the Spirit, my mind turns to a person or situation I feel led to pray for with my understanding. When I believe I have prayed for what the Holy Spirit brought to mind, I return to praying in tongues until the burden lifts or I choose to stop, as with any prayer. Lee Gregory

09 SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT

OBSERVATION	DATA & SOURCE	CONFIDENCE
Paul wanted every believer to have it	"I wish you could all speak in tongues" (1 Corinthians 14:5).	HIGH
Paul practiced it often	"I thank God that I speak in tongues more than any of you" (14:18).	HIGH
A normal part of church life	"One will speak in tongues, and another will interpret" (14:26).	HIGH
It must not be forbidden	"Don't forbid speaking in tongues. But be sure that everything is done properly and in order" (14:39–40).	HIGH
The speaker is in control	14:27–32: limits on number, turns, interpretation and silence.	HIGH
Prayer beyond understanding	14:2 and 14:14: spoken to God, by the Spirit, not understood by the speaker.	HIGH
A separate experience from salvation	Acts 8:14–17: the Samaritans had believed and been baptized, yet "the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them, for they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus." They received the Spirit when Peter and John laid hands on them. Acts 19:2–6: Paul asked believers, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" and they then spoke in tongues.	HIGH
Praying in the Spirit commanded	"Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion" (Ephesians 6:18); "pray in the power of the Holy Spirit" (Jude 1:20); "the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words" (Romans 8:26).	HIGH

OBSERVATION	DATA & SOURCE	CONFIDENCE
Brain imaging	Decreased frontal-lobe activity (self-control) during tongues; usual language centers not under the speaker's control (Newberg et al., Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging, 2006). Penn study summary ↗	MODERATE
A global practice	About 279 million pentecostal and 305 million charismatic Christians, about 27% of all Christians (Pew Research, 2011). Pew Research ↗	HIGH
Meaning of "gift"	Charisma: a divine gratuity; a spiritual endowment or miraculous faculty (Strong's G5486). Blue Letter Bible ↗	HIGH

High = directly measured, or stated plainly in the text. **Moderate** = well-supported, with recognized scholarly debate. **Interpretive** = consistent with the text, but depends on how the passage is read.

10 OBJECTIONS CONSIDERED

OBJECTION

Tongues ceased with the apostles: they "will become useless" (1 Corinthians 13:8–10).

RESPONSE

The same passage says knowledge passes away too, "when the time of perfection comes" and we see "face to face" (13:10–12). That describes Christ's return, and knowledge has plainly not ceased. Paul's instructions in chapter 14 carry no expiration date.

OBJECTION

Not everyone speaks in tongues: "Do we all have the ability to speak in unknown languages?" (12:30).

RESPONSE

Paul is describing public ministry roles: not everyone brings a message in tongues to the church, just as not everyone is a teacher. The same writer says "I wish you could all speak in tongues" (14:5) and separates private prayer in tongues (14:28) from public ministry.

OBJECTION

Biblical tongues were real foreign languages, not prayer languages.

RESPONSE

At Pentecost hearers understood their own languages. But 1 Corinthians 14 describes tongues that no one present understands, spoken to God, needing interpretation (14:2, 14:28). Scripture includes both.

OBJECTION

It is emotionalism or self-generated speech.

RESPONSE

Counterfeits exist, which is why Paul gives a test (12:3) and rules for order (14:26–40). Misuse calls for correction, not prohibition (14:39–40).

11 CONCLUSION

Praying in the Spirit is a gift, and like any gift it can be declined. Refusing it outright, or resisting it, amounts to telling the Holy Spirit His gift is not valuable, or fearing man more than God. At the very least, asking Him about it opens the door to understanding, with no downside beyond the humbling experience of trying something unnatural. The upside is considerable, not least the ability to pray exactly what needs to be prayed in times of uncertainty or distress. Scripture gives every Christian clear direction to desire the gift, cultivate it and pray in the Spirit privately.

> *"I will pray in the spirit, and I will also pray in words I understand." 1 Corinthians 14:15*

12 FURTHER RESOURCES

BOOK **God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul** Dr. Gordon D. Fee
https://www.amazon.com/s?k=God%27s+Empowering+Presence+Gordon+Fee

BOOK **The First Epistle to the Corinthians (NICNT)** Dr. Gordon D. Fee
https://www.amazon.com/s?k=Fee+First+Epistle+to+the+Corinthians+NICNT

BOOK **Spiritual Gifts: What They Are and Why They Matter (cessationist view)** Dr. Thomas R. Schreiner
https://www.amazon.com/s?k=Schreiner+Spiritual+Gifts+What+They+Are+and+Why+They+Matter

ARTICLE **Language center of the brain is not under the control of subjects who speak in tongues** University of Pennsylvania
https://www.eurekalert.org/news-releases/614400