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# ***The Gift of — Spiritual Language***



*“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”*

*Acts 2:4*

## THE GIFT OF SPIRITUAL LANGUAGE

What should be understood as a blessing from God received with joy has become a point of debate and division in the Church. For the last 100 years there has been much discussion regarding the ongoing empowering presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian and in the life of the Church. The experience of the Early Church recorded in Acts; the writings of Paul regarding spiritual living; and the consistent claims of much of the contemporary Church indicate that the gift of spiritual language is a significant part of the Christian experience.

Take a moment to review some of the experiences of the early Church.

<sup>NLT</sup> Acts 1:4-5 *“Once when he was eating with them, he commanded them, “Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the gift he promised, as I told you before. <sup>5</sup> John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”*

<sup>NLT</sup> Acts 8:14-17 *“When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that the people of Samaria had accepted God’s message, they sent Peter and John there. <sup>15</sup> As soon as they arrived, they prayed for these new believers to receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>16</sup> The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them, for they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>17</sup> Then Peter and John laid their hands upon these believers, and they received the Holy Spirit.”*

<sup>NLT</sup> Acts 10:44-48 *“Even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the message. <sup>45</sup> The Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, too. <sup>46</sup> For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter asked, <sup>47</sup> “Can anyone object to their being baptized,*

*now that they have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?”<sup>48</sup> So he gave orders for them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Afterward Cornelius asked him to stay with them for several days.”*

*NLT Acts 19:1-6 “While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul traveled through the interior regions until he reached Ephesus, on the coast, where he found several believers. <sup>2</sup> “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” he asked them. “No,” they replied, “we haven’t even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” <sup>3</sup> “Then what baptism did you experience?” he asked. And they replied, “The baptism of John.” <sup>4</sup> Paul said, “John’s baptism called for repentance from sin. But John himself told the people to believe in the one who would come later, meaning Jesus.” <sup>5</sup> As soon as they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup> Then when Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in other tongues and prophesied.”*

Some have taught, to varying degrees of restriction, that the dynamic encounter with God in a person’s life is limited to the experience of personal redemption from sin. They go on to teach that the Christian life is essentially one of “progressive sanctification” (personal spiritual development) that is limited to the experience of suffering and the works of discipline. However, as is expressed in the verses above, there is an additional compelling encounter with God that has to do with the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life beyond the Holy Spirit’s involvement in redemption. (See *A Life of Distinction* Care Group Study guide.) The gift of spiritual language\* seems to be significant if not normative in this encounter.

*\* This is often referred to as “speaking in tongues,” a phrase that does not correctly relate the essence of the Greek even though it may literally translate the words. We could say of a Frenchman that his native tongue is French, but we would more likely say his native language is French. The wording in the Greek refers to language not to the tongue, and a better usage would be the word “languages,” hence our use of the term “spiritual language” rather than speaking in tongues.*

## **THE REASONS FOR SPIRITUAL LANGUAGE**

Various reasons have been offered for the gift of spiritual language as recorded in Acts. Some have said it was for the enhancement of evangelism, noting that in Acts 2 people heard the disciples praising God in their own language. This account, however, clearly indicates this caused confusion, and it was the preaching of Peter that led to conversion. Others have said it was confirmation that Gentiles could be saved as recorded in Acts 10. Although Gentiles speaking with spiritual language did confirm their redemption to Peter and the Jews with him, God's intent was to confirm the gospel to the Gentiles who experienced salvation by faith in Jesus. This is consistent with the Acts 19 account of Paul preaching in Ephesus and the Acts 8 account of the Samaritan experience.

In all these accounts spiritual language is related to a confirming evidence of the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit in a person's life. Paul's question to the disciples in Ephesus is telling, "*Have you received the Holy spirit since you believed?*" (Acts 19:2).

What does Scripture tell us about the gift of spiritual language in the life and experience of the believer and the Church, and the reasons for its expression?

## REASON ONE

- Enhanced Communication with God

If personal redemption from sin leads to a personal relationship with God then communication with God is essential, for communication is the foundation of any relationship. At its core spiritual language is about communication between God and humanity that is enhanced by the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit elevating the level of communication beyond the limits of human intelligence and vocabulary.

<sup>BBE</sup> Romans 8:26-27 *“And in the same way the Spirit is a help to our feeble hearts: for we are not able to make prayer to God in the right way; but the Spirit puts our desires into words which are not in our power to say; <sup>27</sup> And He who is the searcher of hearts has knowledge of the mind of the Spirit, because He is making prayers for the saints in agreement with the mind of God.”*

Paul indicates this type of prayer is personally beneficial for the person praying—<sup>NLT</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:4 *“A person who speaks in tongues is strengthened personally in the Lord...”*—which he contrasts to a person who prophesies in church by which the entire congregation is *“...strengthened, encouraged, and comforted...”* (1 Corinthians 14:3).

A reading of 1 Corinthians 14:1-22 will show that Paul understands spiritual language to have two expressions. One of the expressions is private and results in personal edification—edification being understood as *“strengthened, encouraged, and comforted”*—as described above. A second expression is public prayer, which in order for the congregation to be edified by the content must be translated by the empowerment of the same Holy Spirit that inspires the prayer. Paul clearly teaches that he prefers—and possibly restricts himself—to speak direct words of edification through the gift of prophecy when in church, but that he *“...speaks in tongues more than all of you...”* (1 Corinthians 14:18).

Paul understands and practices a private expression of spiritual language:

<sup>NIV</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:15 *“So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind.”*

He gives explanation regarding both, and directives for public expression of spiritual language. Public utterance is different in purpose from the private expression of the same essential manifestation of the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

It is this private language of prayer, for the purpose of personal edification, that seems to be bound up in experiencing a dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit extending beyond the experience of redemption. There remains debate about the nature of the relationship with some saying that spiritual language is a pre-requisite to all things miraculous in correlation to the Holy Spirit. Others simply indicate the spiritual language is one of a number of things opening the heart and mind of the Christian to “the things of the Spirit.” What does seem certain is resistance to the expressive aspects of the miraculous— things like spiritual language, prophecy, and the like—goes with resistance to things like healing and miracles. It appears that openness in one area brings openness in another; eagerness in one area brings eagerness in another. It seems it is not without reason that Paul warns against resisting spiritual language and despising prophecy.

Referring to this practice of private prayer using spiritual language, Paul says:

<sup>NIV</sup> Ephesians 6:18 (a) *“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests...”*

Jude says:

<sup>NIV</sup> Jude 1:20 *“But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit.”*

## REASON TWO

- Surrender of the Tongue to God

James tells us:

<sup>NIV</sup> James 3:2 (b) *“If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.”*

He goes on to say:

<sup>NIV</sup> James 3:8-10 *“but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.”*

Not only does the personal gift of spiritual language enhance my communication with God, in a miraculous way it brings my actual tongue under the power and control of the Holy Spirit. So not only is my communication enhanced in a way that causes me to be strengthened, encouraged, and comforted in prayer and worship, but my obedience at the point of greatest struggle is assisted.

## REASON THREE

- God's Will and Pleasure

If personal redemption—forgiveness of and restoration from sin—leads to a personal relationship with God which requires communication between God and the person who has been redeemed, then this gift of communication is going to be pleasing to God as well. Some have used the illustration of the difference between what it sounds like to God when we pray and when the Holy Spirit prays through us. While we speculate regarding this, what we know is personal redemption is about restoring the broken relationship between God and humanity; that communication is fundamental to any relationship; and the gift of spiritual language is about enhanced communication between God and us. Is it wrong to believe this enhanced communication is pleasing to God? “*Have you received the Holy Spirit since you believed?*” (Acts 19:2).

## **ADDITIONAL STUDY**

Banister, Doug. *The Word and Power Church: What Happens When a Church Seeks All God Has to Offer?*: Published by Zondervan (October 1999).

Deere, Jack. *Surprised by the Spirit*: Published by Zondervan (September 1996).

Hayford, Jack. *The Beauty of Spiritual Language*: Published by Word Publishing (December 1992).

Webber, Dennis. *A Life of Distinction* — (Sermon series and Care Group Bible Study): Published by Parkway Christian Center (January 2004).

### **Bibles Used:**

**BBE** ~ *Bible in Basic English*

**NIV** ~ *New International Version*

**NLT** ~ *New Living Translation*



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