

TONGUES: A Position Paper

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I. Why the controversy?

There are very few topics that are more controversial topics within evangelical Christianity than the topic of tongues. The reasons why are many, but basically the confusion stems from a lack of systematic theology from within the scriptures. Because it is not thoroughly discussed, it remains a mysterious gift that is not well understood, easily misused, even abused to the point of contention between believers of all backgrounds.

Typically, as seen below, evangelicals have one of seven responses on the spectrum of belief regarding this particular issue.

1. **Denial** – *“This gift is not for the church today, and no matter what anybody says, I believe all manifestations of this gift are not from God.”*
2. **Resistant** – *“I don’t care if this gift is for today or not, I don’t understand it and I don’t want to. I am largely skeptical of those who practice it.”*
3. **Open** – *“I do not have this gift, but I do believe that others genuinely possess it. If God wants me to have this gift, He’s going to have to reveal it in very obvious ways.”*
4. **Seeking** – *“I believe tongues exists and I am praying and seeking ways that would reveal if I have it. I also know that this may not be the gift that God desires for me to possess.”*
5. **Practicing** – *“I have this gift and use it regularly, but am careful about the way I use this gift in a corporate church setting.”*
6. **Uninhibited** – *“I use this gift often and am often heard speaking in tongues in public settings.”*
7. **Zealous** – *“I have this gift and believe you should, too. And if you don’t speak in tongues, then you are either not spiritually minded or not filled with the Spirit.”*

One can see how this particular topic has divided the church, because those that identify with positions **1. Denial** & **7. Zealous**, are highly likely to offend and/or be offended by the rest of the spectrum, simply because of the dogmatic perspective that is imposed on everyone, regardless of their belief. These positions, no doubt, cause great division within the body. Positions **2. Resistant** & **6. Uninhibited** have the potential to offend and/or be offended by those in the middle, mainly because of the judgment that is easily perceived by the corresponding opposing viewpoint. Divisiveness can easily creep into the body through those holding tightly to these two positions.

At Mosaic, for the sake of the unity that we hold so dearly, we encourage all members and regular attenders to prayerfully consider moving into positions **3. Open**, **4. Seeking**, or **5. Practicing** above. We’ll talk more about these positions as we proceed.

II. So Where Does Mosaic Stand On The Issue?

Here's a summary of principles regarding tongues that we would like all Mosaics to embrace. For more detail on how we arrived at these principles, read thoroughly all the pages that follow, which includes an exegetical analysis of 1Cor 14.

- **We believe tongues is a spiritual gift meant for today for the building up of the body in an indirect sense.** This issue has long divided many churches. We are committed to honor this gift in such a way that it does not cause division by holding to a balanced view of the gift and its use.
- **The gift of tongues is not given to all believers.** Those that have the gift must not judge those that don't have it as less spiritual. Those that don't have it must not judge the gift as fake or meaningless. Paul makes it clear that not all believers speak in tongues, but that some do.
- **Tongues is a form of prayer,** meant to build up the person praying in a tongue, so that they may in turn build up the body. We say this is an indirect ministry gift because in order to build up the body, tongues must first be used to build up the person who then either builds up the body through teaching that everyone can understand or be interpreted if used in a public church setting.
- **There are clear guidelines for its use** in a corporate worship service. We strive to honor the admonishment of 1Cor 14 with regards to the priority of maintaining order in the service and giving higher priority to the use of the gift of prophecy by those who are gifted with it, namely your pastors. Each of Mosaic's teaching pastors, like Paul, would rather speak five words with our minds than ten thousand words with a tongue.
- **Those that possess the gift of tongues are urged to use it discreetly and with sensitivity.** Paul is our example here and in the passage in 1Cor 14, he makes it clear that though he possesses the gift of tongues, he apparently does not use it publicly and encourages those that have the gift to show restraint in its use for the sake of the unbeliever.

III. What Are The Overarching Principles?

Scripturally, there is really only one instructive passage of scripture on the topic of tongues, found in 1Cor 12-14. Paul specifically addresses tongues in chapter 14, but spends significant verbiage on the spiritual gifts in chapters 12 & 13. There are other descriptive passages that mention tongues, such as those found in Acts, that should be weighed accordingly while properly interpreting the 1Cor passage.

Our enemy is exposed when a gift that is supposed to be used to build up the body is instead used to tear it down; which is exactly what the controversy surrounding tongues has done in many cases. The controversy itself can, to a certain degree, be clarified by building a theological framework that is balanced and scripturally sound. In 1Cor 12, Paul gives us instruction on a list of spiritual gifts, which includes both “various kinds of tongues,” and “interpretation of tongues” (vs 10). From this passage, we can draw some overarching principles, not just about tongues, but all spiritual gifts listed in this chapter.

- **The gifts are to be used for the building up of the body** (“*for the common good*” - vs 7). God intended the gifts listed in vss 8-10 to build up the common good of the Body of Christ. Again, if this gift is tearing down the body of Christ, it points to the enemy, not God.
- **The gifts are from and empowered by God** (vs 6). They are meant as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit (vs 7), meaning that they were to be used as a demonstration or sign that the Holy Spirit is real and active. This can only lead us to conclude that the gifts are beyond human talent, and should allow God to be clearly seen as they are used in accordance with His will.
- **The gifts are distributed according to God’s will** (vs 11). It is not our choice as to whether or not we have this gift. It is our choice, however, as to whether we are going to use this gift in accordance to God’s intention and purpose.
- **The gifts are to be used with love as their foundation** (vs 13:1-3). Again, the ultimate goal of the gifts is to build up the body of Christ. If the gifts are utilized without the love of Christ, the gifts are neutralized to meaningless liabilities to the church; the exact opposite of their intent. Especially as it relates to this particular gift, tongues without love, is reduced to a meaningless jibberish. It is meant, as we will see, as a means of personal edification, and as such needs to be practiced with sensitivity, especially if unbelievers are present.

Many use the clause, “for tongues, they will cease,” mentioned in 1Cor 13:8 as the crux for their belief that tongues is no longer active or meant for today. However, reading this clause in context of the chapter, leads us to believe that the entire chapter is about the supremacy of love, the eternity of love, and the necessity of love over the actual function of the all the gifts, in and of themselves.

The clause that is used to justify, largely position **1. Denial** above is, in our opinion, a weak argument for what is known as a Cessationist point of view. Why would God eliminate a powerful gift that was supposed to point to Him and build up the body of Christ? And why would He make the fact that they were supposed to end, along with knowledge, so hidden and unclear so as to seemingly mention it in passing as a simple clause the midst of the great love chapter? What was the original intent of the chapter?

At Mosaic, our desire is to encourage our people to move into positions **3. Open, 4. Seeking** or **5. Practicing**. Scripture is very clear that tongues is not for everybody (vs 12:29-30, 14:5), and that each spiritual gift is given according to the will of God.

IV. What Does The Bible Have To Say About It? (FAQs)

Therefore, those who hold the positions that are more dogmatic, as in “*everyone* should or should not be practicing this gift,” are encouraged to examine the entirety of 1 Cor 14 to seek clarity on the issue. This chapter will be discussed in the context of the **Frequently Asked Questions** that typically accompany the verses.

¹Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.

1. How should I view spiritual gifts?

Verse 1 tells us that we are to **earnestly desire** the spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophesy. This means that the gifts should not be ignored, but intentionally and genuinely sought after. Why? So that the body might be built up. Earnestly seeking the gifts means more than giving it a passing thought, but instead describes the intentional effort that should be made to discover what gifts God may have given us.

Paul makes it clear in vs 1, that prophecy is the preferred gift over tongues. Why? Because it requires no interpretation and can therefore directly build up the body, which leads to the next question.

2. What does it mean to prophesy?

This spiritual gift has several purposes including: to build-up, encourage or console (vs 3), and/or also to reveal, make known, foretell or instruct (vs 6). It is speaking the heart and mind of God to others in such a way that He can supernaturally do all the things that Paul describes in vss 24-25.

3. What is tongues?

²For 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.

The word “tongues” translated from the Greek, simply means “languages.” Does this mean that the language is a known language with vocabulary, syntax and grammar? There is no conclusion on that particular word. In Acts 2, there is *descriptive* evidence that tongues was a known foreign language, as everyone heard the gospel in their own language. Also of interest is the listing of “various kinds of tongues” in the list of spiritual gifts in 1 Cor 12:10. Though not explicitly stated what the various kinds of tongues are, it leaves room for us to believe that tongues can exist in known and unknown language forms.

In 1 Cor 14, however, Paul states that tongues is not a known language with structure, but that the one that speaks in tongues utters **mysteries in the Spirit** that **no one understands**. Many suggest that since the tongues described at Pentecost were indeed known foreign languages unknown to the speaker, that all tongues must be that way. If that were true, Paul would have clarified that here. Instead, he describes tongues as an unknown language, but even more important is the purpose of that unknown language.

Paul makes it very clear that the one speaking in tongues **speaks not to men, but to God**. This sounds a lot like prayer! And so if the purpose of tongues is to speak with God and not to men, then it does not matter if the language is a known foreign language with syntax, grammar and vocabulary or if it is an unknown language that only God can understand. In either case, the speaker does not understand what he or she is saying. How can that possibly benefit someone? Read on.

A couple of other clues about the nature of tongues are found in vs 4 and 14.

⁴The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself

¹⁴For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful.

Opponents of the gift of tongues often use vs 4 as a justification against its use. “It’s a selfish gift, since the one that **speaks in a tongue builds up himself**.” How untrue is this reasoning! When we spend time alone with God in prayer, Bible study, worship, meditation and reflection, we are building ourselves up. In the context of the gifts, Paul is essentially saying that the person **who speaks in a tongue builds up himself**, for the purpose of then building up the body. Look at the number of times that Paul talks about the body’s edification in this chapter.

In vs 14, Paul speaks from his own experience that when **I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays**. Note again, that Paul directly links tongues and prayer. However, when he prays in this way, his **mind is unfruitful**. The mind of the person praying in tongues is unengaged in the prayer. This is a very difficult concept for many to understand, especially those that have an intellectual bent. How can your mind be unengaged in prayer? We’ll discuss this later on, but for now let us summarize the definition of tongues by connecting vs 2, 4 and 14.

Tongues is a form of prayer, in which the language spoken is unknown by the speaker, and during which the spirit prays, while the mind remains unengaged. The one praying in tongues is building up him or herself for the purpose of subsequently building up the body.

4. Under what conditions is prophecy greater than tongues?

³On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. ⁴The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.

Paul delineates between the two gifts of prophecy and tongues used in a public church setting. Prophecy is ministry gift that is used for the **upbuilding and encouragement and consolation** of the people which directly **builds up the church**. Tongues, on the other hand, is an indirect ministry gift which has to be interpreted before the body is encouraged. Paul continues to explain.

⁵Now 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.

According to this passage, prophecy is the preferred gift over tongues because the step of interpretation is not required. However, in his disclaimer, **unless someone interprets**, Paul equalizes the two gifts in their impact in that the church is **built up** in both cases. Therefore, it can be deduced that tongues with interpretation has the same ministry impact as prophecy. However, Paul makes it clear that prophecy is the preferred method possibly because tongues requires more steps, therefore, more opportunity for error, to have the same impact.

Note also the phrasing at the beginning of vs 5, **now I want you all** ... which again implies that not all do, and thus, reinforcing what he stated earlier in 1Cor 12, that tongues is a gift that is not given to every believer.

5. Why Is interpretation Important In A Public Church Setting?

⁶Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? ⁷If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? ⁸And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?

The gifts of prophecy and tongues with interpretation builds up the body in the following ways: **revelation, knowledge, prophetic foretelling or teaching**. However, if a tongue is un-interpreted, it brings no building up of the body in these ways. It is like playing an instrument randomly or trying to lead an army into battle by playing a bugle with random notes. Implication: No one will know what to do in that situation. There is no corporate instruction or direction through un-interpreted tongues.

⁹So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. ¹⁰There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, ¹¹but 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. ¹²So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

Again, the emphasis of the gifts and our desire to use them should lead us to **excel in building up the church**. When tongues are un-interpreted, no one will understand, and the church is not built up. What a shame that the gift of tongues has torn down church after church and caused disunity instead of God's original intent.

¹³Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret.

Paul's exhortation to **pray for the power to interpret**, is taught in the context of the public expression of tongues. One does not need interpretation if the gift is used privately, since when used in private, the spirit prays, and the person praying is built up without interpretation.

He also makes clear here that a person may possess both the gift of tongues and the gift of interpretation. In this special case, the person who possesses both tongues and interpretation would essentially possess the equivalent gift of prophecy.

6. What Makes Tongues So Mysterious?

¹⁴For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful.

This description of tongues is what makes the mysteriousness of the gift difficult for many believers to grasp. How can one pray with the mind being unfruitful? Paul is describing what many people who pray in tongues describe. The mind is unengaged, but the spirit (lower case) is the primary human faculty engaged in prayer; a characteristic that greatly contributes to the misunderstanding of this gift.

However, to those that do practice the gift, the description needs no explanation. To pray in such a way that **my spirit prays**, simply means that the connection and communion with God is beyond the words that the mind can produce or understand. The mind must remain unfruitful in that case, where it is not trying to speak into the prayer of the moment, whether to discourage praying in this way, or convincing the person praying that they are wasting their time or driving any other aspect of the prayer. Paul explains more,

¹⁵What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also.

Again, it is important to note that Paul is speaking of praying in the corporate worship setting, Paul encourages praying both **with my spirit** and **my mind**, meaning that the prayers were to be intelligible and understood, but have spiritual content that encourages the human spirit to connect with the Spirit of God. The same can be said of singing praise to God. At Mosaic, many times, our corporate praise singing connects deeply with the spirit of the men and women participating in the worship. And just as Paul says, we **sing with our spirits** and with our **minds also**. Those singing know what's being sung as both their spirits and their minds are engaged.

¹⁶Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say "Amen" to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? ¹⁷For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up.

Paul is setting us up for the foundational principles of the use of tongues in a public setting. It rests on the concern for the **outsider**, the non-believer. The outsider must be able to agree with our prayers and our **giving thanks** with our **spirit**. If the **outsider** comes in and hears nothing but unintelligible sounds, then he or she **is not being built up** and the gift accomplishes nothing, except for the edification of the one speaking in a tongue.

7. How Did Paul Use This Gift?

¹⁸I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. ¹⁹Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Paul admits that he has been given this gift and that he practices it **more than all of you**. This is quite a statement as to the importance and practice of tongues in Paul's personal life. He confidently shares that he speaks in tongues more than all the members of the Corinthian church?! However, there is no mention in any of his writings or within the book of Acts of Paul using this gift in a public manner. In fact, this is the only place in scripture where he addresses his personal use of tongues, so we must place serious weight into what he says about his practice of it.

In fact, he also clearly states that **in church**, as in public worship service, his preference is to **speak five words with my mind than ten thousand words in a tongue**. In other words, he would rather speak five intelligible words of revelation, prophecy, knowledge or instruction to the body, than ten thousand words of unintelligible words that nobody understands. Paul also possessed the gift of prophecy and since he has already spoken of the greater nature of the gift of prophecy over tongues, we can conclude that he used his prophetic gifting in public, and his gift of tongues in private.

Paul understood the discretion that needed to be exercised with this gift. He knew tongues could be highly misunderstood and therefore, highly divisive. If Paul, being one of the most gifted men of God in history, discreetly used this gift in the public church setting, how much more should we also restrain our use of this gift in such a way that it builds up the body instead of divides!

8. What's The Bottom Line?

²⁰Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. ²¹In 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." ²²Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers.

Paul begins concluding his thoughts on tongues. He begins by encouraging the Corinthians to be mature in their thinking (Don't let what God meant to build up the body instead divide you. Handle the gifts with maturity!) and he quotes an Old Testament passage (Isaiah 28:11) as to its foretelling, thus legitimizing its existence.

²³If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? ²⁴But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, ²⁵the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.

He then concludes with the overall purpose of the use of tongues *in a corporate worship service*: to bring unbelievers to Christ! He also states a mind-boggling reality: that uninterpreted tongues actually repel unbelievers! Instead of authentic conversions through the supernatural revelation by God of the heart, the unbeliever is repulsed from the entire experience. God forbid that this occurs at Mosaic!

Sheer chaos ruled the way of the Corinthian worship services. Unbelievers would enter the church, hear many people speaking in tongues without interpretation, others yelling prophecies over each other and would walk out saying "**you are out of your minds**"! Confusion reigned! Paul desired for the unbeliever to enter and hear a prophetic word

(either through direct prophecy or interpreted tongues) in such a way **that he is convicted, called to account, the secrets of his heart disclosed** (supernaturally), which results in heartfelt repentance and brokenness exemplified **by falling on his face** before God.

9. What Are The Practicals?

²⁶What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. ²⁷If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. ²⁸But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God. ²⁹Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. ³⁰If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. ³¹For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, ³²and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. ³³For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

He then sets guidelines to ensure that order prevailed in the service so that the Holy Spirit could work. Number one: **Let all things be done for the building up.** If tongues is to be used as a public prophetic pronouncement, it needs to be limited (**two or at most three**), edifying to all (**let someone interpret**). If there was no one to interpret, the person speaking in tongues was to **keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God.** Again, without interpretation, tongues is, and should remain a private form of prayer, used with restraint and sensitivity.

Paul then lays down a very important principle about God: He is not the **God of confusion!** This means that, just as we alluded to earlier, the enemy has co-opted this gift, sown confusion into the body of Christ that has resulted in division and isolation; the exact opposite of its intended use. It is ironic that this often quoted truth about God was penned in the context of the confusion that un-interpreted tongues brought to the corporate body.

At Mosaic, we do have the prerogative to include as part of the worship service, a time for tongues to be spoken to the corporate body and then interpreted as directed by scripture. However, we have chosen instead to use the preferred method of Paul, which is simply to speak directly to the body with our spirits *and* our minds, resulting in the men and women whose hearts are revealed by our supernatural God and who fall on their face before Him. We believe God is well pleased with this approach as evidenced by the many hearts and minds in our midst that have been transformed through Christ.

Paul ends the discussion on tongues in 1Cor 14 with one last important thought. (**Note:** We are intentionally leaving out the discussion associated with vs 34-36 for another position paper to be written at a later time.)

³⁷If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. ³⁸If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.

In his final paragraph, Paul again establishes a principle that determines a level of maturity that is expected from those practicing the gifts. Namely, humility should be evident in the use of these gifts and everyone should recognize the authority with which Paul speaks on this topic. And if **anyone does not recognize this as a command of the Lord**, he or she is **not** to be **recognized** as one who possesses a spiritual gift for the common good. How sad

when the gift becomes more important than the unity of the body! Those that zealously proclaim their giftedness to the detriment of the common good should not and will not be recognized as being spiritually gifted simply because of the lack of love and maturity associated with possessing their gift. Our hope is that all those who practice the manifestations of the Spirit will do so under the humility of Paul's instructions.

³⁹So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. ⁴⁰But all things should be done decently and in order.

Again, one more time, Paul emphasizes the superiority of prophecy and his desire that we **earnestly desire to prophesy**, which unlike tongues, does not require a tongue to be spoken or an interpretation. He does, however, say that we are not to **forbid speaking in tongues**, meaning that we are not to disallow the gift from being used. Those possessing the gift can do so quietly when unbelievers are in attendance or more openly when only mature believers are gathered for prayer.

V. How Then Should We Live?

Humbly! With discretion! Without judgment!

At Mosaic, we place a higher value on unity than secondary doctrinal issues (those doctrines that are not primary to our faith, see our website for a complete list). In this case, the unity of our body is more important than the gift of tongues. Paul clearly supports this position as well. As elders, our job is to protect the vision and direction of the church and preserve the unity of the believers, while allowing all aspects of the diversity of the body of Christ to be expressed in ways that would honor and continue to build up our unity.

Occasionally during our worship services and in our prayer services, you may hear someone quietly speak in an unknown tongue. There are certainly times where our worship becomes uninhibited in our praise of God. How should you respond? If everyone is free to sing or speak praises to our Lord, then we would like to encourage you to view this as if someone were praying to him-or-herself in a foreign language. Please don't let this distract you from your own worship! Certainly, do not allow judgment to enter your heart against the brother or sister in Christ.

For those of us who do practice this gift with enthusiasm, we are encouraging you to do so with great discretion, realizing that you too, can have the same affect on the unbeliever as the Corinthians of Paul's day. If un-interpreted tongues becomes so evident that an unbeliever enters our worship service and leaves saying that we are "**out of our minds!**" then we, like the Corinthians, have become too **eager for manifestations** of this particular gift.

Like Paul, we do not desire for there to be any barrier to the unbelievers that attend our services. Paul makes it clear that un-interpreted tongues unintentionally repels the unbeliever away from the opportunity to hear the gospel. And make no mistake about it, the enemy will intentionally use this lost opportunity to drive a wedge between us.

History has taught us that this gift has the potential to divide more than most. And again, let us reiterate that love is more important than the gift itself. All gifts must be operated on the foundation of love, so as you practice these things, be mindful of those around you, and let love restrain and consider others as more important than yourself.