

Membership and Sign Gifts Policy

The Elder Board approved this policy on April 20, 1995

Introduction

With the rise in emphasis upon the “Charismatic Gifts” and the challenge from many Christian leaders to “experience the deeper spiritual life,” there has been a great deal of confusion about the place of tongues in the life of a Christian.

In Isaiah 28:11, the prophet warned Ephraim that before God’s judgment fell upon them for their sins He would speak to them with “other tongues and stammering lips.” Thus, when on the day of Pentecost the nation experienced this sign from God, many turned from their sin to follow Jesus Christ. With the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 came the complete fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy.

The purpose for tongues seems to be clearly established by Paul when he quotes Isaiah in I Cor. 14:21-22. He explained the prophecy to mean that the tongues with which the Corinthians were so involved were purposed of God to be a sign to the nation of Israel who did not believe. They were not a special “prayer language” or sign of spiritual maturity. In I Cor. 14:14-15 Paul rejects a “prayer language” as being “unfruitful.”

Tongues in Acts

“In the law it is written, ‘through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me’ says the Lord. The gift of tongues, then, is a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers.” I Cor. 14:21-22.

It can be effectively argued that tongues were given as a sign to Israel and not primarily for Gentiles. The audience in Acts 2 was entirely Jewish. The languages spoken were common languages of the day.

Acts 10:44-47—While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.”

Gentiles believed in Christ and received the Holy Spirit. When they spoke in tongues (v.44-46), the Jewish Christians, who were not at all sure that Gentiles could be saved without first becoming Jewish proselytes, were convinced that their salvation was genuine

In verse 47, this experience of tongues was a sign to the Jews.

Again in Acts 11, Peter explained how the gift of tongues was used by God to convince him that the Gentiles had the right to hear the gospel.

(Although there is no direct reference to the exercise of the gift of tongues in Acts 11:15-17, the retelling of the events of Chapter 10 would imply that tongues were present.)

If tongues are indicated in this text, their purpose is to be a sign to the unbelieving Jews.

Finally, in Chapter 19, the Jewish followers of John were led to Christ by Paul. In order to prove to them that this was a true act of God and superior to John's message and baptism, God caused them to speak in tongues when the Holy Spirit came upon them.

Once again tongues were used by God as a sign to the unbelieving Jews. Each time tongues appears in Acts it is in a Jewish context and the experience is related in type and purpose to the known languages spoken at Pentecost in Acts 2.

Tongues in I Corinthians

I Corinthians 12:7—"Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good."

Paul makes it quite clear in I Cor. 12:7 that spiritual gifts were given to "profit" the church, not to divide it. Spiritual experiences and the exercise of spiritual gifts must be for the benefit of the Christian community, and must not bring disorder to the body of Christ.

I Corinthians 14:26—"What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church."

The fact that there has been a great division brought about by the rise of the tongues movement in evangelical circles today casts doubt upon the validity of their exercise when compared with the indisputable benefits brought about by the exercise of the other gifts listed in I Cor. 14:28-31.

I Corinthians 14:28-31—"If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God. Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged."

The grammar of I Cor. 12:31 casts serious doubt upon the modern practice of speaking in tongues.

I Corinthians 12:31—"But eagerly desire the greater gifts."

The Greek term "zelute," to covet or to earnestly seek, has the same form in the second person plural indicative and imperative.

If zelute is taken as imperative, it becomes a command: "you should seek the greater gifts."

If zelute is taken as indicative, it is a simple statement of fact: "you are seeking the greater gifts."

This indicates that Paul was attempting to correct the improper emphasis upon tongues which they considered to be the more exotic and greater gift. This interpretation best fits the context. I Cor. 12:31 begins with the adversative word "BUT" and then discounts the importance of the gift of tongues in 13:1 by contrasting it with love which is the "better way."

Let's read the text with the force of the indicative, which I feel is the better reading.

I Corinthians 12:31-13:1—"But you are eagerly desiring the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal."

Do you see how much better that fits the contrast Paul has been trying to make between those who seek the showy gifts and look down on those people who have lesser gifts? Love must fill the ear of each gifted believer or the use of the gift, no matter how popular or powerful it may be, will amount to nothing.

The whole point of Chapter 13 is lost if Paul says that the believers ought to be seeking these showy, or greater, gifts.

Tongues & Spiritual Gifts in Paul's Letters

When Paul letter to the Corinthians is closely examined, it seems evident that he was writing to carnal Christians who viewed tongues as a mark of spiritual superiority. He denounced this practice and attempted to teach them to desire the “greater gifts” in Chapter 13.

This is brought out again in Ephesians 4 where Paul lists the gifts needed for the edification and building of the church, yet doesn't even mention tongues. The contrast is even more striking when we take into account the spiritual maturity of the Ephesian Christians. If speaking in tongues demonstrated spiritual maturity, then, if any church should have manifested the gift, we would expect it to be the Ephesians.

We must also consider the fact that the book of Romans never mentions tongues, even though it is the most complete exposition of Christian truths in the Scripture. Chapters 12-16 explain the Christian life and service expected for the glory of God but it never mentions tongues. This is, admittedly, an argument from silence. But, due to the character and purpose of Ephesians and Romans, it is improbable that tongues would be excluded from both books if the “gift of tongues” was an important part of maturing Christian experience or worship.

Rules that Govern the Use of Tongues

One more issue is important to consider. The modern tongues movement often violates the Scriptural conditions under which tongues, may be exercised. I Cor. 14:3-40 sets forth conditions under which tongues may be used in the church:

1. Prophecy, or preaching, is the most important gift.
2. No more than 3 are to speak in tongues in a church.
3. Tongues must be interpreted or not used in public.
4. Women may not exercise these gifts in the church.
5. All is to be done decently and in order.

When we consider: the original purpose for tongues was a sign to the Jews that the Messiah was offered, the spiritual condition of the Corinthian church, the absence of tongues in the mainstream of the Christian church from the end of the first century until today, and the violation of Scriptural guidelines by the modern tongues movement, it seems unlikely that the use of tongues, as it is practiced today, can be considered to be the exercise of the same gift of the Holy Spirit which is mentioned in Acts.

Summary

In summary we should keep in mind the following issues:

1. Christ did not speak in tongues—since our highest calling is to be like Him we must conclude that speaking in tongues is not important for every generation of believers.
 2. Tongues are not a sign of spiritual maturity according to I Cor. 12:13, 27-30. The Corinthians had the gifts but Paul considered them spiritual babies (see: I Cor. 3:3-4; 14:20).
 3. Tongues are not a sign of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. I Cor. 12:13, 30 makes it clear that all Christians are baptized in the Holy Spirit.
 4. Tongues are not given to edify individual Christians. I Cor. 14:4 would indicate that edification may be a by-product of the exercise of tongues, but not its purpose (Isaiah 28; Acts 2; 10:1-19; I Cor. 14).
 5. Tongues are not to be sought after. According to I Cor. 12, the Spirit gives to whomsoever He wills. Gifts should not separate the church into groups that compete for prominence based upon giftedness.
 6. Ecstatic utterances are common in witchcraft, pagan religions and cults. The experience of “tongues” is not necessarily a biblically sanctioned experience or evidence of a spiritual gift.
- Spiritual Gifts are given by God to edify and build up the Church in unity unto Christ likeness (Eph. 4:11-16). Any activity which brings pride and division to the Body of Christ can not be considered an honorable exercise of a “spiritual gift.”

The Position of Northwest Bible Church

There are at least 6 positions regarding tongues which are taken by Christians today:

Position 1 - believes tongues to be the sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and important for spiritual growth and power, personally practices speaking in tongues and encourages others to do so as well.

Position 2 - believes in and personally practices speaking in tongues but may or may not see tongues as a sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and does not feel it necessary to encourage others to seek the gift.

Position 3 - believes tongues are a legitimate gift for today but does not see tongues as a sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and does not personally practice speaking in tongues.

Position 4 - is not sure whether or not tongues are a legitimate gift for today.

Position 5 - believes that the gift of tongues is not normative (intended to be common practice) in the church today or a sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit but is open to their possible use by God for special occasions or in unique circumstances, yet is opposed to the practice of tongues in the ministries of their own local church.

Position 6 - believes that tongues is not normative or a legitimate spiritual gift today and is opposed to the practice in any Christian context today.

What is the position of Northwest Bible Church?

“We believe that some gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues and miraculous healings, were given as authenticating signs in the early church and were temporary (I Cor. 14:22-24; Heb. 2:4). We believe, however, that God answers prayer for the sick in accordance with His will (I John 5:14-15; James 5:15-16). Doctrinal Statement, Section 4

Northwest Bible Church is a “non-charismatic” church.

While we recognize the importance of the gift of tongues in the early days of the New Testament Church (i.e. speaking the Gospel in languages which had not been learned by the speakers), we do not believe that the gift is normative in the life of the church today.

Furthermore, much of what is called “speaking in tongues” today does not resemble the experiences described in Acts. This does not mean that they are demonic or evil, but it certainly calls into question their legitimacy as expressions of the gift of tongues as described in Acts and I Corinthians.

Those who hold to positions 5 or 6 may become members and may teach in accordance with the Doctrinal Statement.

Those who hold to positions 2, 3, or 4 may become members but must agree to pursue the unity of the body by not teaching contrary to the church Doctrinal Statement or attempt to proselytize others to practice speaking in tongues.

For the sake of doctrinal unity in spirit and practice, those who hold to position #1 above may not become members of NBC.

Any member whose beliefs change to reflect position #1 should discuss the issue with the Elders with a view to understanding the possible impact upon themselves and the body at NBC.

Because the Scriptures call us to unity in Christ and to manifest the Fruit of the Spirit, and since I Corinthians places tongues on the bottom of the list of gifts, we have chosen to de-emphasize this controversial practice. We are guided by an ancient credo which states: “in essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, and in all things charity.”