

Why Is the Gift of Speaking in Tongues So Awkward?

Churches across the world will commemorate the day of Pentecost this next Sunday, whether they meet online or in their buildings. Most will celebrate the need for the Holy Spirit's power, and they might read Acts 2:1-4, which tells how the Spirit's flame rested on all the disciples who prayed in the upper room that day.

But when they read verse 4 (NASB)—"And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance"—some people will shift in their seats or clear their throats. This aspect of Pentecost makes people uncomfortable. We don't know what to do or say about tongues. It's just too weird for most people.

It was awkward for me too, when I first heard about it. I'd never met a Pentecostal. Speaking in tongues wasn't part of my church tradition, and I had never heard anyone do it. In fact, the first person I heard speak in tongues was myself, when I was baptized in the Holy Spirit in 1976!

Since then, I have prayed for countless people to be filled with the Holy Spirit. I don't force them to speak in tongues. I just warn them that it might happen, since it happened in Acts 2.

Several years ago, when I was teaching at a ministry school, a 22-year-old guy from Maryland asked if I could pray with him. He had heard me share how I was baptized in the Holy Spirit at age 18, and he wanted the same experience.

This young man, Eric, understood that he already had the Holy Spirit living inside of him. But he knew that Jesus offers us more. He knew the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a second experience in which the fullness of God's divine power anoints

us for ministry.

I explained to Eric that speaking in tongues makes no sense in the natural. It actually sounds like gibberish, yet the Bible says praying in the Spirit strengthens us profoundly (see 1 Cor. 14:2, 4). I laid hands on Eric and asked Jesus to fill him with divine power and to release the Holy Spirit's language as a manifestation of the overflow.

Nothing dramatic happened at that moment, but I told Eric to remain expectant. I've learned that oftentimes, the release of the Spirit comes more easily when people are alone and not distracted by people standing around. I encouraged him to go home and pray some more.

A couple of days later I received a message from him, letting me know that a small miracle had occurred in his life. He wrote: "Thank you for praying for me to speak in tongues. That night was interesting because phrases started to pop into my head. I began speaking the phrases, and by the next night I was speaking in tongues as I was falling asleep. Now, every moment that I am not worshipping, praying, eating or speaking to someone, I am practicing this gift. Praise God!"

Many of us fall into the trap of downplaying speaking in tongues, even after we've received the gift ourselves. We may consider it divisive (and it certainly can be when it is abused) or we're embarrassed because it seems fanatical to our friends or family members.

Yet when I read the apostle Paul's comments on the issue, I realize that speaking in tongues was a key component of the New Testament church. Not only did tongues play a fundamental role on the day of Pentecost when the church was born, but this strange gift also fueled Paul's personal zeal. The same apostle who wrote the book of Romans and preached to Caesar wrote: "I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all" (1 Cor. 14:18). Paul most likely prayed in tongues for hours at a

time.

Paul also instructed the Corinthians: “Do not forbid to speak in tongues” (1 Cor. 14:39). He knew that even though some people might be tempted to misuse this gift (and this is usually why people restrict it), we must never shut it down.

Eliminating the gift of tongues can have a direct impact on the flow of the Holy Spirit’s anointing in the church. If you forbid tongues or pretend this gift is not needed today, you might as well flip a breaker switch and turn off all the lights.

Speaking in tongues doesn’t make us holier than anyone else. And if we don’t exhibit love and Christian character, Paul said it becomes a useless gift comparable to a noisy gong (see 1 Cor. 13:1). But when stewarded properly and tempered with humility, this seemingly insignificant gift becomes an invisible spiritual weapon.

I’m not saying we should showcase tongues in church gatherings, scream at people in tongues or make people feel like misfits if they haven’t experienced the gift. (We must forgive immature Christians for doing those things.) When the Corinthians put tongues on the platform and turned their meetings into chaotic circus sideshows, Paul rebuked them sternly.

But the same apostle who warned his followers not to flaunt tongues in public also spent countless hours praying in tongues privately—because it’s a vital source of spiritual power that we must never neglect. This Pentecost, don’t apologize for the secret of the apostle Paul’s power just because it’s awkward. We need the Holy Spirit’s power like never before.