

The Gift of Tongues: Bridging the Gap

Acts and the Recorded Occurrences

The Charismatic Movement in general, and the gift of tongues in particular, are cause for quite a bit of controversy among the evangelical church. Many words have been written on this topic, and I hesitate to add more. Nevertheless, my hope is not to debate opinions or feelings, but rather to go to scripture and see what can be found. It's with this desire in mind that our study begins in Acts:

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine." (Acts 2:1-13 ESV)

...While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days. (Acts 10:44-48 ESV)

...And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. And he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." And Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. There were about twelve men in all. (Acts 19:1-7 ESV)

Lessons From the Accounts

Acts chapter 2 is the first mention of the Spirit giving a gift called tongues. Prior to Acts, we see the word tongues used in two ways: the various known languages of the people, or the literal tongue in the mouth of the speaker. Any time tongues are referenced up to, and including, this point, the context is always people plainly speaking in their own languages.

It's worth noting that the act of the Spirit granting a gift of tongues is completely absent in the Old Testament. Prior to the New Testament, we have no record of a believer speaking in a language they didn't know to a people native to that language. We similarly have no record of a believer speaking in a language that no one knows, including themselves, for the purpose of personal prayer.

Looking to the list given in 1 Corinthians of various kinds of spiritual gifts, we see: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, the ability to distinguish between spirits, various kinds of tongues and the interpretation of tongues. Ignoring tongues, every one of these gifts is talked about in the Old Testament. Why would tongues be the only spiritual gift that is never mentioned, and therefore apparently never given, to God's people until Pentecost?

Looking back to the accounts recorded in Acts may give us some clues. In Acts 2, the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit. They then began to speak, preaching the message of the gospel to the large gathering of people present. What made this extraordinary was that the apostles were speaking in the listeners' own languages, even though the apostles didn't know those languages themselves. The Spirit was causing the apostles to speak in foreign languages, ones native to their listeners. Linguistically we see the same thing happening in Acts 10 and 19, according to the ESV Study Bible notes on Acts 2:

to speak in other tongues. The word translated "tongues" (Gk. *glōssa*, plural) can also be translated "languages," and that is the sense that it has in this verse. In this case the other languages were understood by various people present in Jerusalem, but in 1 Corinthians 14 Paul expects that no one present in the church at Corinth will understand the languages being spoken "in tongues" (see 1 Cor. 14:2). Acts and 1 Corinthians are probably not speaking of different types of gifts but different kinds of audiences: people who understood the languages were present in Jerusalem but were not expected to be present in Corinth (see notes on 1 Cor. 12:10; 12:29–30; 14:2). This is clearly a miracle of speaking, not of hearing, for the disciples began "to speak in other tongues." As the Spirit gave them utterance indicates that the Holy Spirit was directing the syllables they spoke. Speaking in tongues in this way also seems to be the phenomenon experienced by those at Cornelius's house (Acts 10:45–46) and the disciples of John at Ephesus (19:6).

Why is the gift of tongues just now being given at Pentecost, having been absent for thousands of years prior? To begin to answer this question we need to understand a key aspect of the context of the time period. Redemptive history in the Old Testament was primarily focused on Israel. Other than some exceptional situations, this almost exclusively pertained to Hebrew-speaking Jews.

What is unique about Pentecost? Just prior, Jesus commanded his followers to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations." "All nations" by necessity includes people from every language. How are we supposed to go into the world and make disciples when we don't speak the language of the land? Training and teaching Jews was one thing. They all spoke the same language. But all nations? How is that even possible?

An understanding of the gift of tongues as we see it in Acts would seem to make sense here. Tongues were never needed before because Jesus hadn't come yet. We hadn't been charged with telling the whole earth about Jesus yet. Giving us a new gift, a gift of the Spirit causing us to speak in other languages so that foreign people could understand us for the advance of the gospel, would seem to make sense. If the gift of tongues is meant to be understood as a personal prayer language the institution of tongues at Pentecost seems arbitrary.

The Zealous Practitioners

I think that moving onto 1 Corinthians 12 gives us more context clues as to what exactly the gift of tongues is. The beginning of the chapter lays out very orderly and nicely what spiritual gifts are:

[12:1] Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. [2] You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. [3] Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit. [4] Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; [5] and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; [6] and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. [7] To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. [8] For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, [9] to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, [10] to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. [11] All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. (1 Corinthians 12:1-11 ESV)

Verses 4-7 give us a context for what spiritual gifts are and what their purpose is. We see three words to describe spiritual gifts: gifts, service and activities. The word for service is also translated as ministry elsewhere and the word for activities is also translated as work elsewhere, as in the context of working out miracles or gospel work.

Verse 7 goes on to say that each person is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. That seems to show that God gives spiritual gifts of varying kinds to his people so that they can use them to serve others for the common good. It seems that the spiritual gifts are meant to be used for the benefit of others.

This seems to be verified when you look further along in the passage at Paul's list of spiritual gifts. We see wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, the ability to distinguish between spirits, various kinds of tongues and the interpretation of tongues. Each of these gifts seems to be outward focused in nature.

Up to this point in scripture the only examples of tongues we have are from Acts. With that understanding of tongues, a person speaking an unlearned but known language for the spread of the gospel, tongues seems to fit with everything we've read so far in 1 Corinthians. Tongues would then be an outward focused manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. The study notes on 1 Corinthians 12:1 are helpful here:

1 Cor. 12:1 spiritual gifts. The word "gifts" is not in the original but is implied by the context (cf. vv. 4, 9, 28, 30–31; 14:1). The Greek lit. means "pertaining to the Spirit," referring to that which has spiritual qualities or characteristics or is under some form of spiritual control. Spiritual gifts are divine enablements for ministry that the Holy Spirit gives in some measure to all believers and that are to be completely under his control and used for the building of the church to Christ's glory (see notes on Rom. 12:4–8). These had to be distinguished from the mystical experiences called "ecstasy" (supernatural, sensuous communion with a deity) and "enthusiasm" (divination, dreams, revelations, visions) that were found in the pagan religions of Corinth.

A good summary of spiritual gifts is that they are divine enablements for ministry that the Holy Spirit gives in some measure to all believers and that are to be completely under his control and used for the building of the church to Christ's glory. An understanding of the gift of tongues as the Spirit giving a speaker words in a language they don't know for the advance of the gospel to a people of foreign speech seems to line up with that. An understanding of the gift of tongues as a personal prayer language has a harder time lining up, as we'll see later.

Paul then goes on to finish the chapter by illustrating that not everyone will be gifted in the same way and that all gifting is important. The body needs every member with each of their unique gifting. He emphasizes this point with verses 27-31:

[27] Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. [28] And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. [29] Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? [30] Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? [31] But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. (1 Corinthians 12:27-31 ESV)

So there are a variety of spiritual gifts, all seeming to be in the context of outward focused as they're service-based and for the common good, and tongues is one of them. Up to this point we only have reason to believe that tongues is exactly what we've seen in Acts, people speaking in known languages that they have never learned for the advance of the gospel to foreign people that don't know Jesus.

This brings us to chapter 13 which is famous for showing us what love is. Paul starts off by using extremes to make a point:

[13:1] If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. [2] And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. [3] If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3 ESV)

It doesn't make much sense to use verse 1 as a basis for tongues as a personal prayer language to God of either unknown languages or angelic languages. Paul is creating unreal extremes here. Even if Paul were to speak every known language and even the language of the angels but he did all of that without love it's pointless. There's no scriptural evidence that there even is a special angelic language, let alone one that humans can learn.

Paul continues to create extremes in verse 2. Even if Paul literally understood all mysteries and all knowledge and had perfect faith but didn't have love it would be pointless. Obviously these are extremes. Paul, and no one else for that matter, can speak every language of men or the language of the angels. Paul, and no one else for that matter, can understand all mysteries and all knowledge and have perfect faith. He's talking in extreme hypothetical impossibilities to emphasize the importance of having love in all you do. This isn't a proof for an angelic language that we can speak just in the same way that it isn't a proof for our ability to understand all mysteries and have all knowledge or perfect faith.

Verses 8-11 give something interesting linguistically:

[8] Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. [9] For we know in part and we prophesy in part, [10] but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. (1 Corinthians 13:8-10 ESV)

Paul is again trying to emphasize his point of the importance of love. Love will never end. Gifts apparently will because they won't be needed anymore. That makes sense. Why would we need gifts in heaven when we have access to Jesus? Paul names three gifts: prophecy, tongues and knowledge. Prophecy and knowledge will pass away. Tongues will cease.

This isn't just creative liberty in translation. The ending of prophecy and knowledge uses a different word than the ending of tongues. The use of pass away for prophecy and knowledge is in the context of the perfect in verse 10. The perfect is the age to come. Jesus' return. We won't need prophecy or knowledge when Jesus returns because we'll be with Jesus.

The use of cease for tongues is in the context of tongues ceasing within themselves. They won't cease within themselves at Jesus' return. Ceasing within themselves wouldn't be dependent on a future event, such as Jesus returning. Tongues will cease at some point in themselves. What does that mean?

If prophecy and knowledge will pass away when Jesus returns, the perfect, it's to be understood that they are passing away because they will no longer be needed. There's no need of prophecy or knowledge if we have Jesus. Why will tongues cease in themselves, at some time before Jesus returns? If tongues is to be understood as a personal prayer language what reason would there be for tongues to cease before Jesus returns? Why would they no longer be needed? Jesus isn't back yet. Wouldn't we still need to be encouraged in our personal prayer times?

But what if tongues is to be understood as the Spirit causing a person to speak in a known language that they never learned for the advance of the gospel to foreign people who would understand that language? Would that gift be needed in America today? Would that gift be needed in modern Europe? Probably not. Would that gift be needed in remote African areas? Probably. I can see why tongues would cease to be needed before Jesus comes back. Globalization means the world becomes smaller as communication becomes easier.

Which brings us to chapter 14. Up until this point, based on everything we've read in scripture, we should really have no reason to believe that the gift known as tongues is anything other than what we've seen in Acts. The three accounts in Acts are the only examples we've had thus far of what the gift of tongues looks like and so far in 1 Corinthians Paul has only mentioned the gift of tongues generically as being a gift.

Here is where, I think, people have to turn to get any basis at all for the gift of tongues being a personal prayer language between them and God. Upon examination I'm not sure if that holds up, even here in chapter 14. Paul contrasts two things at the beginning of the chapter, one that's favorable and one that's not:

[14:1] Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. [2] For 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. [3] On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. [4] The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. [5] Now 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. (1 Corinthians 14:1-5 ESV)

Paul exhorts the Corinthians to pursue love, as he's just laid out in the previous chapter, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts. Out of the gifts, pursuing and using them in love as he's just explained, he tells them to especially desire prophecy. He then sets up a contrast for why they should desire prophecy by talking about those that speak in a tongue.

MacArthur points out, and I think it's interesting, that Paul didn't say "For one who speaks in tongues speaks..." but he uses the phrase "a tongue." Up to this point it's never been worded this way. The gift has always been referred to as speaking in tongues in the plural. MacArthur believes Paul uses the singular here to distinguish between a counterfeit form of tongues that was being used in the church at Corinth. It's a singular tongue because gibberish can't be plural; there aren't various kinds of non-language.

The contrast here makes sense if Paul is talking about a counterfeit gift of tongues that is really only gibberish. Why would Paul paint a gift of the Spirit in a negative light? Why would Paul say that any gift of the Spirit is better than any other? These verses make sense if he isn't talking about a legitimate gift of tongues but rather a false gift of gibberish. Perhaps this is why the KJV translators always added the word "unknown" before every singular use of the word "tongue" in these contexts.

MacArthur points out that verse 2, in light of the contrast most likely being between the legitimate gift of prophecy and a counterfeit form of tongues prevalent in the church at Corinth, would be better translated as "For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to a god; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in his spirit." The Greek text has no definite article. A similar translation of the same word was translated in Acts 17:23 as "the unknown god." The Bible records no incident of any believer ever speaking to God in anything other than normal human language.

Also, as in Romans 8:10, this is an interpretive decision as to whether to understand this as a reference to the Holy Spirit or the human spirit. Since the context seems to be negative since Paul is contrasting a good and bad, the good being prophecy, it doesn't make much sense to deduce that Paul is saying praying to God in the Spirit is a bad thing. It would make much more sense to interpret "a tongue" as a counterfeit version of the true gift of tongues that can really only be said to be speaking to a god and not God and in your spirit and not the Spirit, especially since there is no evidence of any believer ever speaking to God in any way other than normal human language.

Paul begins his first example of the contrast with the last half of verse 2 and carries it into verse 3. The one who speaks in a tongue is not understood by anyone and he utters mysteries in the Spirit (or, perhaps better translated, his spirit). This is odd given what we know about the gift of tongues from Acts, especially coupled with the beginning of verse 2 where Paul says that those who speak in a tongue speak not to men but to God.

The only actual examples we have of tongues are the three accounts in Acts and every one of those accounts is the same. The people were filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in languages that they themselves did not know but their hearers did. How can the person that speaks in tongues speak not to men but to God when what we see in Acts is very much the opposite? The accounts in Acts are all speaking to men and speaking to them about God in their own languages. This seems at odds if we're to take these verses in chapter 14 to be speaking about the legitimate use of tongues.

If, though, these verses are speaking of a counterfeit version of the gift of tongues things start to make far more sense. Of course the one who speaks in a counterfeit tongue speaks to God (or, perhaps better translated, a god) and not men and no one understands him. He's speaking gibberish. If Paul is talking about a counterfeit version of the gift of tongues his contrast makes sense. Tongues, as we saw it in Acts, was for other people. It was for non-believers. It was telling others the truths about God.

Reading "but he utters mysteries in the Spirit" might be better understood in the context of "his spirit" or "a spirit" since mysteries mentioned in scripture (e.g., Matthew 13:11; Ephesians 3:9) were divine revelations of truths previously hidden. If you're speaking gibberish your mysteries are just that; human mysteries. No one can understand you. This makes sense since his contrast is the gift of prophecy, which he says "speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation." Prophecy is for the upbuilding of others, as each other gift is as we've seen before. A counterfeit, gibberish version of the gift of tongues would not be.

Paul makes it even more clear with his second comparison in verse 4 by saying "The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church." Compared to the accounts we have of the gift of tongues being exercised in Acts, how could Paul say that the one who speaks in a tongue is, by comparison, not building up the church? How could Paul say that the one who speaks in a tongue is building up himself and not others by comparison?

Everything we see in Acts is outward focused. Everything we see in Acts is for building up others and pointing them to Christ, not for building up the self. These verses seem at odds if we're to interpret them as Paul is talking about the legitimate usage of the gift of tongues. If, however, we're to interpret these verses as a comparison against the counterfeit gibberish form of the gift of tongues being practiced at the church in Corinth the contrasting makes much more sense.

I think that verse 5 makes more sense once you read verses 26-40. It seems like he's doing a large setup for talking about orderly worship since their times of gathering together was chaos. Regardless, I think there's still something to note now until we get there.

Paul says "Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy." For one I believe he's talking about the legitimate use of the gift of tongues. He's worded it as "tongues" instead of "a tongue" as he just did a verse before, which may be cluing us in that he's talking differently now.

Also, why would he just take three verses to compare and contrast prophecy and tongues, putting tongues in the negative, if he wants us all to speak in tongues? It makes more sense if he was comparing and contrasting prophecy and the counterfeit gibberish form of the gift of tongues prevalent in the church at Corinth and that he is now desiring we would all have the true gift of tongues.

Even still, what does Paul mean here? Paul also desired that we would all be single as he was. Does that mean that we should all be single? Of course not. Not everyone will be single (most will not be) and not everyone will prophecy (most will not) and not everyone will exercise the true gift of tongues (most, I would imagine, will not). We'll get to the rest of the verse in the greater context of verses 26-40 later.

Starting at verse 6 Paul starts to get to his main point at the end of the chapter on the usage of the true gift of tongues in the gathering of the believers:

[6] Now, 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? [7] If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? [8] And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? [9] So 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. (1 Corinthians 14:6-9 ESV)

Paul asks how, if he were to come to them speaking in tongues, it would benefit them. If Paul, or any other believer for that matter, came to other believers such as in their corporate gathering and spoke in tongues the assumption is that it wouldn't benefit anyone. You're speaking in a language that the people gathered together don't know. That's not the point of tongues as we've seen it in Acts.

How will it benefit unless a revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching is brought? What benefits those gathered is understanding through words. If, when you're gathered together, your speech is unintelligible, how will anyone know what you said? You're speaking into the air. If even inanimate musical instruments are expected to make sensible sounds, how much more should human speech make sense, especially when it deals with the things of God?

Paul then points out the obvious, the purpose of every language is to communicate, not to impress and certainly not to confuse:

[10] There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, [11] but 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. [12] So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church [13] Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret. (1 Corinthians 14:10-13 ESV)

This seems to be the point of the gift of tongues as we've seen in Acts. There are countless languages in the world, all of which have meaning and all of them used for communication. The gift of tongues, as we see it Acts, seems to be given to bridge the gap of language for the advance of the gospel. This is why if you don't know the meaning of a people's language you are a foreigner to them and they a foreigner to you.

As Paul will say later, the gift of tongues is for the unbeliever. Even still, the church at Corinth were eager for manifestation of the Spirit, tongues being one of them. Paul reminds them to excel in building up the church. Speaking in tongues in a corporate gathering of believers would not build up the church because no one in attendance would understand the language you were speaking in. Paul is saying that if you desire to speak in tongues in the corporate gathering of believers then you should pray for the power to interpret so that it's edifying for those in attendance.

Paul continues by giving reasons for why using the gift of tongues for reasons other than it was intended; namely, how we see it in Acts being the Spirit moving the speaker to utter words of God in a language they don't know to hearers who understand that language:

[14] For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. [15] What 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. [16] Otherwise, 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? [17] For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. [18] I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. [19] Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue. (1 Corinthians 14:14-19 ESV)

Paul says that if he were to pray in a tongue that his spirit prays but his mind would be unfruitful. This comparison between his spirit and his mind shows that Paul is not talking about the Holy Spirit but of his own human spirit. He's illustrating how unfruitful praying in a tongue would be. The speaker's mind is unfruitful. The speaker can't understand, and what virtue is there in praying to God or praising God without understanding?

It's apparent that Paul is speaking in the negative here and presenting this as a problem since verse 15 asks the question "What am I to do?" If praying in a tongue is unfruitful, what then shall I do? Pray with your spirit but pray with your mind also. Sing praise with your spirit but sing praise with your mind also. Be intelligible. It's unfruitful if you yourself do not know what you're saying or praying. When you pray or when you sing pray and sing in a way that your mind understands.

Paul then brings it back to the purpose of the gift of tongues. "Otherwise, 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? For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up." The purpose of tongues, as with every other gift, is to build up others. If the other person, this time in the context of a corporate gathering of believers, has no idea what you're saying they can't possibly be built up.

When you gather together Paul is saying you should build each other up and that requires understanding. Speak intelligibly. Paul isn't condemning the gift of tongues when it's used rightly. Paul said "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you." Paul, though, understood the purpose of tongues. "Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue."

Church is for the instruction and building up of believers. That requires understanding and that requires speaking intelligibly. This is why Paul said that if you were to speak in a tongue in church that there would need to be an interpretation. Otherwise it would be unfruitful.

Paul continues to more fully explain the purpose of tongues and its place in the church gathering of believers:

[21] In 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." [22] Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. [23] If, 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? [24] But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, [25] the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you. (1 Corinthians 14:21-25 ESV)

When the apostles spoke in tongues in Acts, as the quotation from Isaiah says, they were speaking in foreign languages to the Jews, the people of Israel. The people hearing the apostles were unbelievers. They did not know Jesus as Lord. This is why Paul says that tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers. The true usage of tongues is the Spirit giving the speaker a language that they do not know for the purpose of speaking to foreign unbelievers in their native tongue about Jesus.

What purpose would this have in the church gathering of believers? This is why tongues is a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, and prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. This is why he's speaking out against its use in the church. If an unbeliever enters the church and all are speaking in tongues the unbeliever will think we are all out of our minds. But if all prophecy in church, or proclaim the word of God, the unbeliever will be convicted. Paul was speaking out against misusing the gift of tongues and creating chaos in the church gathering.

Paul begins to sum up everything he's been saying about spiritual gifts:

[26] What 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. [27] If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. [28] But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God. [29] Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. [30] If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. [31] For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, [32] and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. [33] For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. (1 Corinthians 14:26-33 ESV)

So what are we to do with all of this then? When the church was coming together, since they were all eager for the spiritual gifts, they each had hymns, lessons, revelations, tongues and interpretations. What are they to do with all of that? "Let all things be done for building up." That seems like the phrase Paul has been slamming home this entire time. Everything should be done for the building up of others.

If you're going to speak in a tongue, don't do it all at once and have someone interpret it. Otherwise it's unfruitful, as he's explained earlier. If there's no one to interpret, keep quiet and speak to yourself and to God. We really have no reason to believe he means pray in a tongue

to God here. He's always made it fairly clear that praying in a tongue is unfruitful for many reasons since you have no idea what you're praying. Paul is calling for order in the corporate gathering. God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

Paul ends the chapter with:

[39] So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. [40] But all things should be done decently and in order. (1 Corinthians 14:39-40 ESV)

Does Paul forbid speaking in tongues? Of course not. He tells us not to forbid the gift. But, as he says that "all things should be done decently and in order" there's a true way and a false way to exercise the gift of tongues. The false way seems to be in the church service, without order, or as a form of personal prayer or praise. The true way seems to be what we saw in Acts and, if it must be in the church, only with an interpretation. Tongues is for the unbeliever.

Lacking the gift of tongues seems like a disadvantage if it's a personal prayer language.