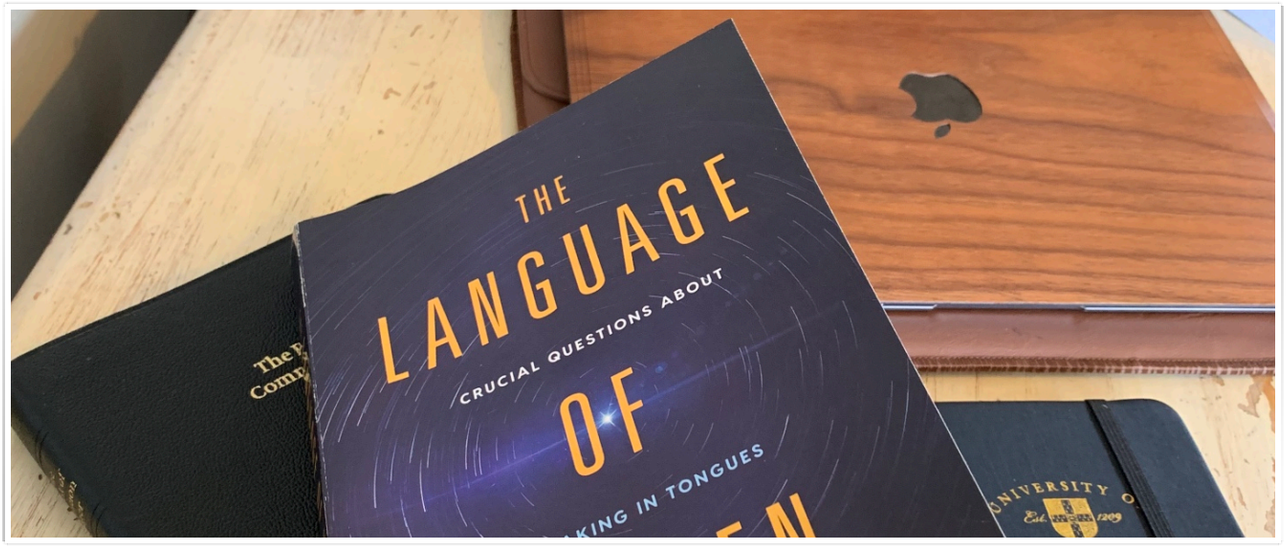

Sam Storms on the Gift of Tongues

Timothy Berg

Like 206

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If you want to be mocked, presumed to be an unintellectual Christian whose gullibility has led them into theological error, and even treated with deep suspicion, one of the best things you could do is say out loud in public, "I speak in tongues." (The apostle Paul of course said exactly this, but he gets a pass on the scorn). Few issues provoke such strong reaction on opposite sides of the aisle within Christianity as does the issue of tongues - specifically, the question of whether tongues is a legitimate spiritual gift God gives today, and what exactly the gift looks like. Is there any biblical legitimacy to claims like this that draw mockery from so many? Are those who make them simply deluded? Are they under demonic influence? Or is something different, and something far more *biblical* going on? I have good friends who stand on every conceivable side of such questions.

Who Is Sam Storms?

When it comes to such a divisive issue, the church benefits from answers that come from an author with decades of pastoral and personal experience on both "sides of the fence." Yet it also needs a voice with decades of academic experience and widely respected theological output, whose robust biblical theology has been tried, tested, and found constantly trustworthy. For some, they would hear no other kind of voice. Sam Storms fits the bill in all the right ways. Sam Storms, as he will explain to all who ask, is,

> "an Amillennial, Calvinistic, charismatic, credo-baptistic, complementarian, Christian Hedonist who loves his wife of 47 years, his two daughters, his four grandchildren, books, baseball, movies, and all things Oklahoma University. In 2008 Sam became Lead Pastor for Preaching and Vision at Bridgeway Church in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Sam is on the Board of Directors of Desiring God, and also serves as a member of the Council of The Gospel Coalition. Sam is a past President of the Evangelical

Theological Society, and currently serves on its Executive Committee."

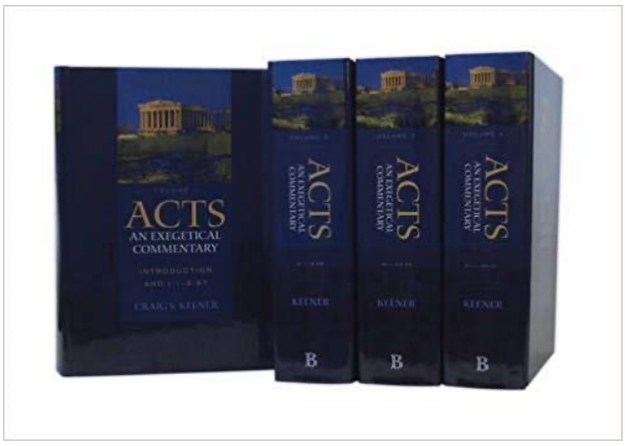
He has become well known as a Charismatic Calvinist urging the church to hold together in convergance both Word and Spirit with equal passion. He and Bridgeway Church pioneered the Convergence Conference to aid and encourage the body of Christ in the passionate pursuit of both Word and Spirit. He earned his B.A. in History from The University of Oklahoma (1973) and his Th.M. in Historical Theology from Dallas Theological Seminary (1977) with the thesis topic, "An Analysis of Jonathan Edwards on the Freedom of the Will." He later went on to complete his Ph.D. in Intellectual History (minor in Aesthetics) from the University of Texas at Dallas (1984), with the dissertation topic, "Jonathan Edwards and John Taylor on Human Nature: A Study of the Encounter between New England Puritanism and the Enlightenment." His full credentials and a list of published writings are available here.

A Comprehensive, Biblical, Helpful, And Readable Book On Tongues

He has written what I think is now the most biblical and helpful book on the gift of tongues that I've ever read. The book is titled, *The Language of Heaven: Crucial Questions About Speaking in Tongues* and can be pre-ordered here. In fourteen chapters the book lays out and answers thirty major questions about tongues in the Bible and life. Many of them are probably questions you have asked before. He has written elsewhere his case that miraculous gifts continue today, and an introduction to the biblical teaching on gifts, as well as having preached a sermon series through I Cor. 12-14 explaining each gift mentioned in the NT. For those who have long respected the careful exegesis and solid biblical theology Sam Storms brings to the table, the chance to read his comprehensive treatment of this controversial gift is an exciting opportunity.

To be sure, not everyone will agree with every position Storms takes along the way. In fact, given the contentious nature of the subject, almost every reader will probably disagree at one minor point or another! But no reader can deny that he is deeply acquainted with the scholarly literature on all sides of the issue (yes, there is such a thing), and deeply acquainted with the personal experience of the God who he believes continues to give this gift. You will hear his own personal stories of encountering God while exercising the biblical gift of tongues (and his story of suppressing the gift for 20 years in a cessationist environment), as well as the stories and testimonies of a few others, some of whom I'm grateful to count my friends.

Academic Engagement

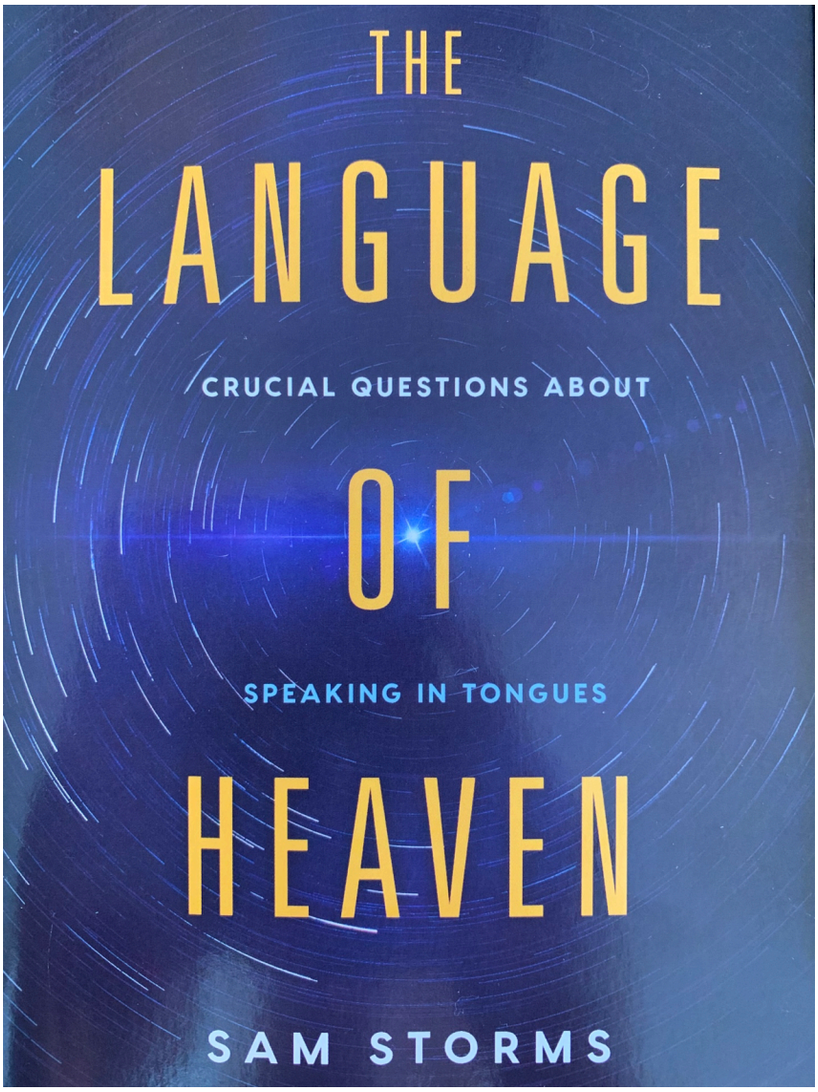


You will find regular reference to the academic works and popular writings of guys like Craig Keener, Eckhard Schnabel, L.T. Johnson, D. A. Carson, Max Turner, John Stott, David Peterson, James Dunn, G. R. Beasley-Murray, Martyn Loyd-Jones, Wayne Grudem, Colin Kruse, Gordon Fee, F. Dale Bruner, John Piper, David Garland, Anthony Thiselton, Paul Gardner, Peter Davids, Gene L. Green, Richard Bauckham, Andreas Köstenberger, Andrew Lincoln, Tom Schreiner, Doug Moo, Robert Menzies, Richard B. Gaffin, and others. Standard and highly academic exegetical resources are employed throughout. (Yes, a book on tongues can refer to Keener on Acts, the ZECNT, PNTC, BECNT, NIGTC, NICNT, WBC, standard Greek grammars, standard academic journals, and more. This one does.) And yet, in the manner Storms has become known and loved for, the whole book is written in an easy-to-read style that will go over no one's head, while more complex interpretive issues or matters of Greek exegesis are relegated to the endnotes for those who want them.

The Questions Asked And Answered

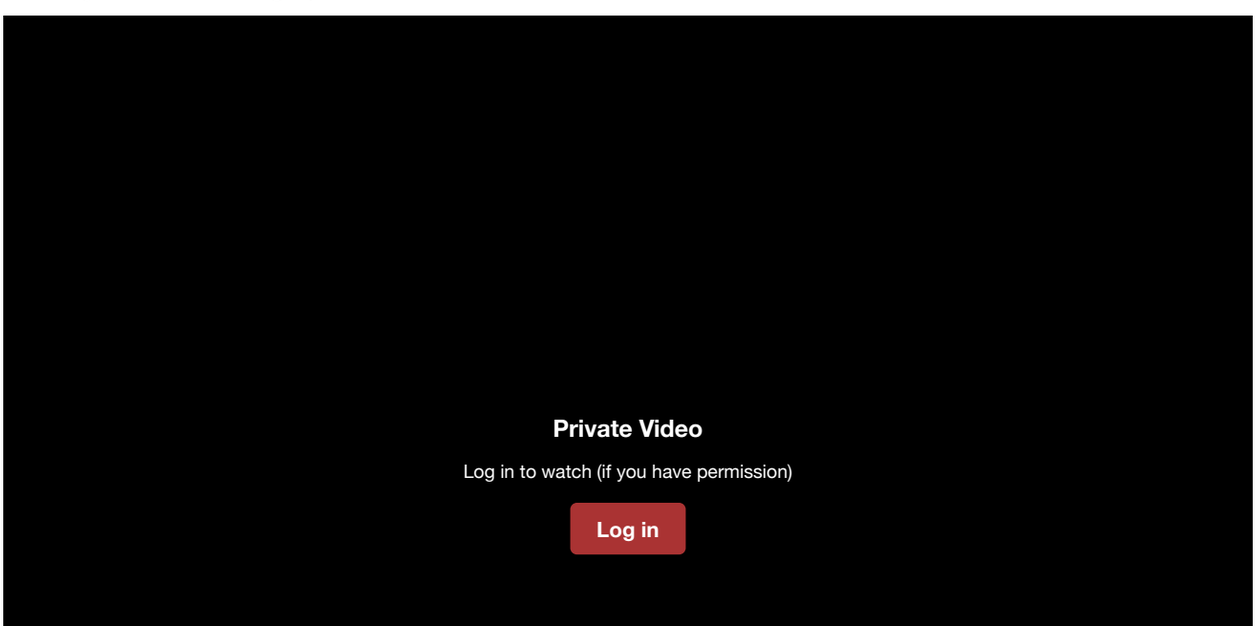
The thirty questions Storms takes up (some of which he has addressed in other writings, though never in this depth) are;

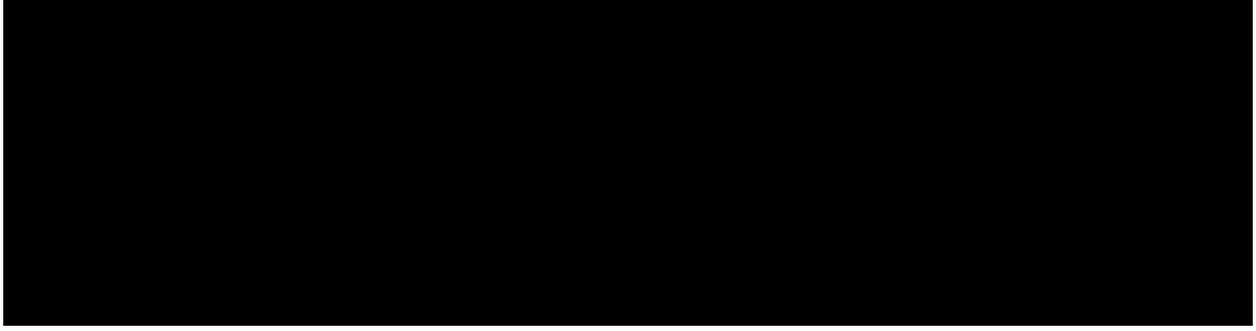
1. What happened on the day of Pentecost?
2. Where else in Acts did people speak in tongues?
3. Does the gift of tongues always and invariably follow Spirit-baptism as its initial physical evidence?
4. Are tongues always human languages previously unlearned by the speaker? If not, what kind of langue is speaking in tongues?
5. Is the gift of tongues primarily designed for the evangelism of unbelievers?
6. Is it OK to seek personal edification by speaking in tongues?
7. What does Paul mean when he says that the person who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues? Is tongues inferior to prophecy?
8. Is tongues-speech an "ecstatic" experience?
9. Is speaking in tongues a sign of anti-intellectualism or a sign that people are afraid of deep theological thinking?
10. Is tongues-speech directed primarily to men or to God?
11. If tongues is primarily a form of prayer in words we don't understand, how can it be helpful to our relationship with God?
12. Is tongues also a way to worship God?
13. Is it permissible for people to sing in tongues in corporate worship?
14. Does Paul always insist on interpretation if tongues are used in the public gathering of the church, and if so, why?
15. Does Paul teach that tongues may be used in private devotional prayer, or must all tongues-speech take place in the corporate assembly of the church, followed by interpretation?
16. What is the gift of interpretation of tongues?
17. Why is tongues-speech often so rapid?
18. Why do some say that speaking in tongues is the least important spiritual gift? Is it?
19. Is the fact that tongues is mentioned only in Acts and I Corinthians an indication that the New Testament authors regarded it as comparatively unimportant in the Christian life?
20. What does it mean to "pray in the spirit"? Is this a reference to speaking in tongues?
21. Does Romans 8:26-27 refer to the gift of tongues?
22. Can we learn anything about tongues from Mark 16:17?
23. Can a person pray for another person in uninterpreted tongues?
24. How might tongues help us in our spiritual battle with Satan and his demonic forces?
25. Is tongues revelatory?
26. Is tongues a sign of judgment against unbelieving Jews?
27. If I don't have the gift of tongues, but want it, what should I do?
28. Can or should all Christians speak in tongues? Is tongues a gift God intends to supply to every believer, or is it only given to some?
29. Do we have good biblical reasons to believe the gift of tongues is still valid for today?
30. Did tongues and other miraculous gifts of the Spirit disappear in church history following the death of the apostles, only to reappear in the twentieth century?



What Are Sam Storms' Views?

For those wanting to know where Sam is coming from, he is a Charismatic who believes that the spiritual gift of tongues has always been present in the church, and did not disappear with the death of the apostles, or the completion of the canon. He believes firmly in the verbal, plenary inspiration, inerrancy, and sufficiency of Scripture, and is thoroughly Reformed in his theology. I count myself honored to hear Sam exegete the word of God every Sunday as he preaches expositionally through books of the Bible, and have countless times found my mind enriched and my heart brought to see the beauty of God in and through his preaching. It's impossible to speak in summary with the nuance he uses as he explains his positions, always with the deepest respect and most gracious tone for those with whom he disagrees. But to briefly share some high points;





He believes the gift of tongues continues today.

He believes the gift at Pentecost was an example of *xenolalia* - the ability to speak real human languages that the speaker had not learned.

He believes this can still occur today.

He believes that the most common manifestation of the gift of tongues throughout history and today is the Spirit-prompted ability to pray and praise God in a heavenly dialect, possibly even an angelic language that is not related to anything spoken on earth. The language has cognitive content, but is not typically a known human language. See a few older sermons explaining this view here and here. He defends this idea quite ably in the book, listing nine compelling reasons why tongues in the Bible are not always a known human language. I urge you to hear his biblical case before brushing him off if you find this notion odd. His section on this topic is by itself worth the price of the book.

On a more personal note, while I came to realize several years ago that there isn't (in my opinion) an ounce of biblical support for the claim that miraculous spiritual gifts have ceased and aren't operating today, I have myself always had serious reservations about practices that go under the banner of "tongues." Primarily this was because I had accepted uncritically the notion that since tongues in at least one passage in the Bible clearly refers to real human languages, this must be its normal (perhaps even exclusive) manifestation. The argument to the contrary is more compelling than you might think, and I now find myself quite willing to accept that biblical tongues is often (perhaps even most often) not the speaking of a known human language.

He thinks it is possible (he doesn't say that it is certain, and cites arguments from multiple views) that the "tongues of angels" in I Cor. 13:1 is a reference to angelic languages. Thus the title of the book. He cites Gordon Fee, Craig Keener, and some of the second temple literature which they cite in their own works demonstrating the existence of such a category in first century Jewish thought.

He does not believe tongues is the initial evidence of Spirit baptism, nor does he believe that it always accompanies Spirit baptism (which he identifies as occurring only once, at conversion). While acknowledging that those who have made this claim are right to seek further and deeper experiences of the Spirit, he thinks this claim is wrong in its view of Spirit baptism, and wrong in its view of tongues.

He does not believe that tongues has an evangelistic purpose anywhere in Scripture. If you hold this position, you might be surprised at the biblical case against it.

He does not believe tongues-speech is ecstatic, as the word is normally understood (he takes up and disagrees with Tom Schreiner's recent book on gifts at this point). That is, the speaker does not enter any kind of trance, does not lose control, and is not in a state where they cannot help but speak, regardless of consequences. He would admonish those who claim such to realize that nothing in the NT suggests this state is associated with tongues.

He does not believe that tongues is an irrational experience, but does believe that it is normally a

transrational one.

He believes, and demonstrates, that tongues-speech is primarily directed towards God in the Bible (as prayer, praise, and thanksgiving). It is primarily *vertically* directed. He thus finds the common (and sometimes manipulative) “message in tongues” idea in some charismatic circles to be unbiblical.

He believes that the Bible demands that tongues speech in the public assembly *must* be accompanied by interpretation, and lightly chides those that have ignored biblical admonitions in this regard. But he doesn’t maintain that tongues *outside* the assembly (in private devotional use) must be interpreted. Again, if you find this notion odd, take the time to hear his biblical case. You might be surprised. I was.

He does not believe tongues is somehow inherently the least important gift. Paul is adamant rather that no spiritual gift is more important than another.

He doesn’t think that references in the NT to “praying in the S/spirit” (Eph. 6:18; Jude 20:21) refer exclusively to tongues-speech, but does think they include it.

He differs from Gordon Fee, and does not see Romans 8:26-27 as referring to tongues-speech, but rather as a glorious truth that applies across the board to all Christians. However, it could encompass tongues as part of what it includes.

He does not believe that tongues is a revelatory gift (though when interpreted it can be *functionally* equivalent to prophecy, rendering a God-directed word that can benefit others, much like we benefit from the God-directed prayers of the psalmist). He makes a strong case that Paul sharply distinguished tongues from revelation. This will be a key chapter for many.

He does not believe tongues are intended by God as a sign of judgment against the Jews. This view may be so common that many will be shocked to realize how unsupported it is by Scripture.

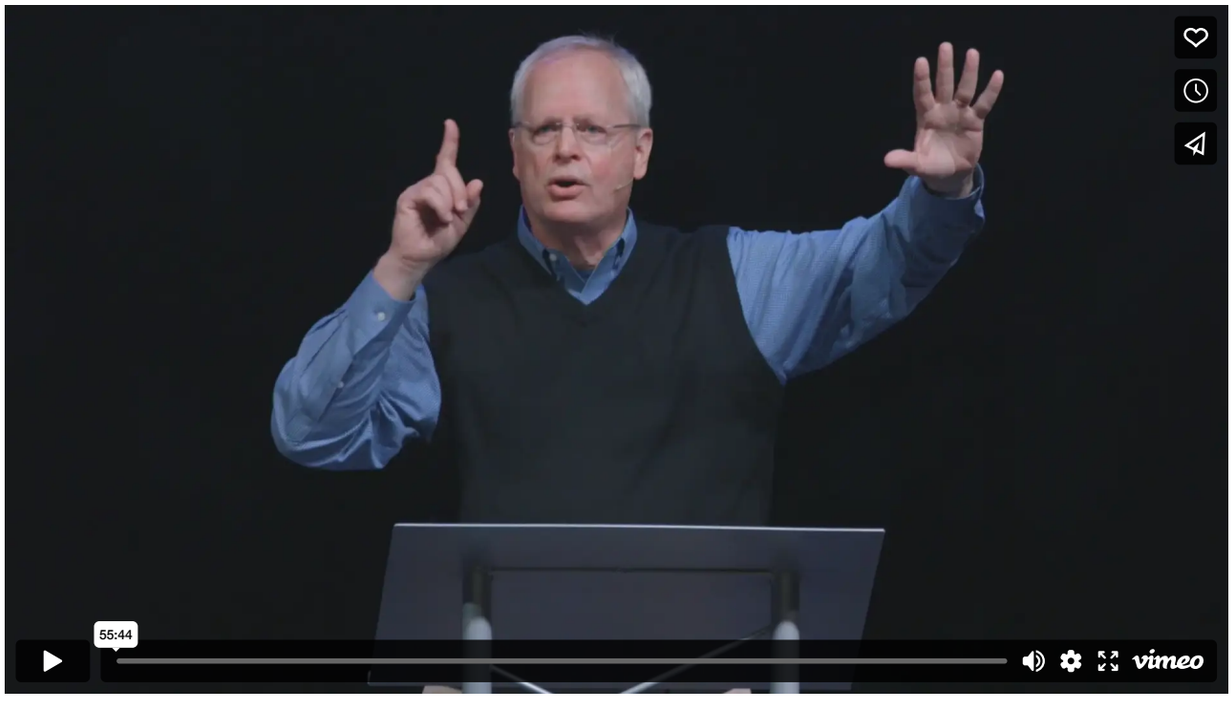
He believes that the "perfect" in I Cor. 13:8-12 is a reference to the state of affairs brought about by the second coming of Jesus Christ at the end of human history (not to Jesus or his coming *per se*). He rejects the claim, which virtually no scholar of any stripe today would defend, that the "perfect" is a reference to the canon of Scripture, which would have been a meaning impossible for the Corinthians to discern from the letter.

While hesitant to speak forcefully, he does not believe the Bible teaches that tongues is for all Christians, in the sense that the sovereign God gives the gift to all. But he does suspect that anyone who wants it is likely evidencing by their desire the intention of God to eventually give it to them. He carefully sets out at length the case that tongues is for all, and that it is not. Those on both sides of this issue will likely be surprised by the weight of the biblical case for the opposite view. But while open to being convinced otherwise, he concludes that God does not give the gift to all.

He does not believe that tongues is any kind of badge of honor, or sign of spirituality. One who speaks in tongues isn't more godly than one who doesn't. Christianity isn't divided into "haves" and "have nots." The Spirit gives the gift sovereignly, and like all his gifts, it is not any kind of comparison point to other Christians.

He takes up at length the common claim that tongues and other supernatural gifts do not continue today, and makes a strong case that they have always continued.

He takes up at length the common claim that tongues and other supernatural gifts disappeared historically after the death of the apostles, only to reappear in the twentieth century. He sharply disagrees, showing, in the most heavily documented chapter, instances of charismatic gifts throughout history. These examples include manifestations among some of the most respected names on the early church landscape, like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Perpetua and Felicity, Theodotus, Hippolytus, Novation, Eusebius of Caesarea, Cryil of Jerusalem, Athanasius (possibly), the Cappadocian Fathers, Hilary of Poitiers, and even Augustine, to name a few just from the early period.



Who Should Buy This Book?

If you have questions about the gift of tongues, and want an explanation that is uncompromisingly biblical, this is the book for you. If you are nervous about (or even firmly disagree with) the notion that tongues might continue today, this book is for you. If you have question about how the gift should operate in the local church, this book is for you. Regardless of your views on tongues, all readers will benefit from this careful exposition that is sensitive and gracious to those who hold other views, while demanding that we be biblical in how we think and speak of tongues. One need not agree with every one of the author's conclusions to benefit from his careful biblical study in this book.

I highly recommend it to all. This book is the best treatment of the issue I have seen.

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