

The Holy Spirit And Tongues

Questions are being asked today by those who love Jesus regarding the practice of tongue-speaking. *What* is the gift of tongues? *How* did Christians receive this gift in the first-century church? *Why* did God give such a gift? Should *all Christians* seek this gift today? Can one be a *true child of God* and not speak in tongues? Let us make a sincere effort to understand New Testament teachings regarding these and other questions about tongue-speaking.

Before we begin our study, a note of warning must be sounded. The subject of tongue-speaking has such strong emotional appeal to some that it may be difficult for them to be objective in their study of this subject. This may be especially be true of preachers who earn their living by leading people into such practices. However, if we love the truth with all our hearts, we will honestly ask, “What does *the Bible* teach on this subject?” and we will carefully examine New Testament teachings to find God’s answers to our questions. Paul warned that those who fail to love the truth will receive “a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness” (2 Thessalonians 2:11, 12).

Preachers are accountable to God for what they teach on this subject, and all people are accountable for what they choose to believe and practice. If the practice of modern-day tongue-speaking is from the Holy Spirit, every child of God should desire this gift. On the other hand, if

this practice is counterfeit—a work of Satan—then the error must be exposed, and the movement must be strongly opposed! In view of this sober warning, let us prayerfully examine God’s teachings on tongue-speaking. May the Lord bless our study.

It may shock some to realize that the subject of tongues is mentioned in only three New Testament books: Mark, Acts, and 1 Corinthians. Jesus first mentioned the subject in the closing verses of Mark’s Gospel as He personally met with His apostles. Please notice the difference between a “disciple” and an “apostle.” Since a disciple is a learner, *all* who study the teachings of Jesus—including the apostles—may be considered disciples. However, the apostles were special disciples whom Jesus authorized to preach and to cast out demons (Mark 3:14, 15). Following Pentecost and the baptism of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles (Acts 2), the apostles assumed a position of great authority within the church, second only to the authority of Christ Himself (Ephesians 1:22; 2:20).

TONGUES IN THE BIBLE

In the Gospel of Mark

Prior to His ascension, Jesus met with His “chosen eleven” (the Twelve minus Judas) and commanded them in Mark 16:15–18,

Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbe-

lieved shall be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it shall not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.

“Speaking with new tongues” was one of five signs that Jesus promised would accompany those who believed in His name. Those who claim to speak in tongues today point to this passage as scriptural authority for their practice. They argue that “new tongues” were to accompany the believer; therefore, “if one is a believer, he can speak in tongues.” This raises a question: “Did Jesus promise in Mark 16 that *all who believed in Him* would speak in tongues?” In 1 Corinthians 12:30 Paul asked, “All do not speak with tongues, do they?” Paul’s rhetorical question demands the obvious answer: “No.” Jesus never promised that *all believers* would speak in tongues, and to claim tongue-speaking as proof of one’s salvation is to contradict the writings of the inspired apostle Paul!

We saw in the previous lesson on “The Spirit in Acts 1—8” that the only believers who performed the signs named in Mark 16 were the apostles and those upon whom the apostles laid their hands. Since the office of apostleship was not a permanent office, the miraculous gifts which were passed on through the laying on of the apostles’ hands were temporary as well.

Tongues in the Book of Acts

One sign listed in Mark 16:17, “new tongues,” convinced unbelievers to listen to the apostles as the church began on Pentecost. Later, tongue-speaking confirmed to the apostles that Gentiles could be part of Christ’s church. These occasions are recorded in Acts 2 and 10.

After the baptism of the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles, they spoke with tongues on Pentecost, according to Acts 2, in fulfillment of the promise given in Mark 16:17. These tongues were intelligent foreign languages which Jews “from every nation under heaven” fully understood (Acts 2:5, 6). This miracle amazed the multitude, who asked, “And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? . . . we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God” (Acts 2:8, 11). Notice that the words “languages” and

“tongues” are used interchangeably in these verses. Paul also used the words synonymously in 1 Corinthians 14:10, 13.

Because the tongues given on Pentecost were intelligent foreign languages, they served as a sign to the Jews who at the time did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God. Paul later wrote, “So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers; . . .” (1 Corinthians 14:22). As the Holy Spirit spoke through the apostles in the native tongues of the Jewish multitude, God demonstrated a special sign and fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy that “By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, . . .” (1 Corinthians 14:21). Anyone who claims to speak in tongues today *must speak* intelligent foreign languages which they have never studied in order to duplicate what the apostles did on Pentecost. They must also speak in native tongues of people who know that what they hear can only be a miracle from God! Anything less than this *does not* serve as a sign to those (including this author) who do not believe such a gift is still given to the church today.

Another mention of tongues in Acts concerns Cornelius and his family in chapters 10 and 11. As Peter preached to these Gentiles, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message.” They began “speaking with tongues and exalting God” (Acts 10:44, 46). Remember that tongues were a sign to unbelievers. Peter and his Jewish brethren did not believe that the Gentiles could become Christians. God Himself had to convince them that salvation for the Gentiles was His will, and He did so by giving Cornelius and his family the gift of tongues. When Cornelius and his family began speaking in tongues, Peter asked, “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?” (Acts 10:47). Through the miraculous gift of tongues from God, Peter and his Jewish companions were convinced that it was God’s will for them to accept the Gentiles into His eternal family.

Later, in reporting this incident to the church in Jerusalem, Peter said that what had happened to Cornelius reminded him of the promise Jesus had given to His apostles: “. . . you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 11:16). Peter

related Cornelius' experience to the only incident he had ever witnessed that was comparable to the events of Acts 10, and that was Pentecost. Through the baptism of the Holy Spirit the apostles had received the gift of tongues directly from God. Cornelius and his family had received "the same gift" (Acts 11:17) in the same way (directly from heaven, without human intervention). Knowing that God was the authority behind the events of Pentecost, Peter asked, "Who was I that I could stand in God's way?" When the Jewish Christians heard Peter's story, "they quieted down, and glorified God, saying 'Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life'" (Acts 11:18). God's gift of tongues to Cornelius was all the evidence Peter and his Jewish brethren needed to be convinced that God "made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:9).

The events surrounding the conversion of Cornelius and his family completed the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy that God would "pour forth of [His] Spirit upon *all mankind*" (Acts 2:17; cf. Joel 2:28; emphasis mine). The apostles received the baptism of the Holy Spirit as Jewish representatives. Cornelius and his family received the gift of tongues through a special, miraculous outpouring of the Spirit upon them as Gentiles. When we understand the purposes of these two unique miracles, we also understand why such miracles will never be repeated. Those who ask God to baptize them in His Spirit today are asking Him to keep a promise He has already fulfilled!

One other reference to the gift of tongues in Acts is found in chapter 19. Paul met some disciples in Ephesus, and this discussion followed:

And he said to them, "... 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' And they said to him, 'No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.' And he said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' And they said, 'Into John's baptism.'" Paul then proceeded to teach them and baptize them by the authority of Jesus. "And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking with tongues and prophesying" (vv. 2-6).

Paul asked these disciples if they had received the Holy Spirit. When they answered in the negative, Paul immediately questioned their

baptisms, because water baptism by the authority of Jesus includes the promised gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). When these men learned this, they were baptized. Paul then laid hands upon them, and "the Holy Spirit came *on them*, and they began speaking with tongues and prophesying" (Acts 19:6; emphasis mine). First came water baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then, through the laying on of the hands of an apostle, the Holy Spirit imparted miraculous power.

Tongues in 1 Corinthians

We have examined New Testament evidence on tongues from the Gospel of Mark and the Book of Acts. The final book that mentions tongues is 1 Corinthians. In this epistle Paul listed tongue-speaking as one of nine gifts (1 Corinthians 12:8-10), along with "the interpretation of tongues." The gift of the interpretation of tongues involved miraculous ability to translate the foreign language of the tongue-speaker. Both tongues and the interpretation of tongues involved miraculous, inspired knowledge of a foreign language never before studied by the speaker or the interpreter.

Another of the nine gifts from the Holy Spirit involving miraculous knowledge was "prophecy" (1 Corinthians 12:10). Prophecy was the ability to speak as "men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:21). Those who possessed the gift of prophecy were known as "prophets" (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:28). The "mystery of Christ" was miraculously "revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit" (Ephesians 3:4, 5). Through these two inspired offices, the Lord's Word was delivered as the foundation of truth upon which the Lord's church is built, "Jesus Himself being the corner stone" (Ephesians 2:20).

"Apostles and prophets" held *authoritative offices* involving the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and miraculous gifts. No one today can meet apostolic qualifications, and no apostle is present to lay hands on Christians in order to transfer miraculous gifts. We must seriously question today's tongues as being "of God"! Paul soberly warned all Christians that "the activity of Satan" includes "all power and signs and *false wonders*" (2 Thessalonians 2:9; emphasis mine). Is Satan performing counterfeit miracles and tongues in

our world today, even using the precious name of Jesus to perform them, as Jesus promised he would? (Cf. Matthew 7:22, 23.)

If tongues and the interpretation of tongues are still given to the church today, the other seven gifts *must also* be available (including the gift of prophecy). If prophecy were available today, that would mean that God is still revealing inspired truth to mankind. That cannot be the case, because Jesus promised *His apostles* that the Holy Spirit would guide *them* into *all* the truth (John 16:13). Through the apostles and prophets the faith has been “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). God’s Word, miraculously revealed from heaven in the first century, was confirmed by God Himself through the signs which followed. Today we possess the complete, written Word of God, and we must trust it alone to make us “equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:17). No additional revelations or miraculous signs are needed! Faith comes from the Word of Christ (Romans 10:17), and we are commanded to “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7).

TONGUES TODAY

Today some are apparently not satisfied with God’s arrangement of walking by faith in His Word. They crave signs and personal, emotional experiences as proof that God is with them and that they are saved. We must remember Jesus’ teaching that “an evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign” (Matthew 12:39).

Desiring Prayer Languages

In their search for special signs, some claim that God has given them “prayer languages,” through which they can pray to God in the Spirit. Nowhere in the New Testament do we read of a “prayer language” given strictly for one’s own personal edification. While it is true that “one who speaks in a tongue edifies himself” (1 Corinthians 14:4), Paul lamented that praying in a tongue leaves the mind “unfruitful” (1 Corinthians 14:14), and the church is not

edified. He instructed that the tongue-speaker should pray that he may interpret “so that the church may receive edifying” (1 Corinthians 14:5), and he encouraged all Christians to “seek to abound for the edification of the church” (1 Corinthians 14:12). Christians who focus on personal edification, rather than the edification of the body, fail to place emphasis where the Lord placed it!

Silencing the Intellect

A serious warning must be sounded regarding the spiritual danger of trying to bypass the mind or silence the intellect in an effort to receive direct communication from God. Some

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false teachers claim that the mind and the intellect interfere with the working of God’s Spirit. This view contradicts Paul, who wrote in 1 Corinthians 14, “I shall pray with the spirit and I shall pray with the mind also” (v. 15). He exhorted the brethren to be mature in their thinking (v. 20) and declared that he would rather “speak five words with [his] mind, . . . rather than ten thousand words in a tongue” (v. 19). These admonitions force us to conclude that if Paul visited some denominations today, he would denounce much of what is being practiced “in the name of Jesus” as contradictory to his plain teachings which *we know* are from the Holy Spirit.

If one’s mind is not engaged when he prays, how can he know that he is praising the Lord? How can he be sure that the Spirit of God—rather than the spirit of Satan—is leading him into prayer? Remember that demons believe (James 2:19), pray (Matthew 8:31), and call on the name of Jesus (Acts 19:13–17). As we have already seen, many on the Judgment Day who thought they had the power and the authority of Jesus will discover that they were deceived all along (Matthew 7:22, 23). *Please* do not become a fulfillment of this prophecy!

Trusting Subjective Experiences

It is dangerous to trust any emotional experience as a confirmation of a special relationship with God. Such a self-centered perspective results in pride and immaturity of thought. It leaves the spirit open to Satan, who is more than willing to fill us with his presence. Satan will use the name of Jesus or any other tool at his disposal to

deceive our hearts and lead us from the light of God's truth into the darkness of his lies. It is frightening to realize that Satan has access to our minds and emotions and can make us "feel good" or even "feel righteous" to achieve his ungodly purposes. Only if we trust God's Word can we be protected from Satan's deceptive lies and vicious attacks upon our souls!

THE PURPOSE OF TONGUES

Let us ask a vital question: "Why did the Holy Spirit give miraculous gifts in the first place?" Since God always has a divine purpose behind His actions, why did He empower some in the first century with such signs? Mark 16:20 gives the answer to that question: "And they [the apostles] went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the word by the signs that followed." Jesus gave miraculous signs to His apostles *to confirm the truthfulness* of their message. The gift of tongues provided them with inspired knowledge to communicate the gospel in languages of people all over the world. Other miraculous signs gave additional proof that the Lord's power and authority backed the message they proclaimed.

It is important to notice that Jesus said nothing about the use of signs and tongues to confirm the believers' salvation, to make the recipients feel more spiritual, to stir great crowds of people into religious fervor, or to indicate spiritual maturity or superiority. Such are the purposes of men, not of God! Signs validated the gospel message as being genuine truth from God. Early disciples had no written New Testament to consult as their religious authority, so God confirmed the message of the apostles through miraculous signs (2 Corinthians 12:12).

The author of Hebrews concurred with this understanding. He stated that the message of salvation "was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard [the apostles], God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will"

(Hebrews 2:3, 4). The inspired writer stated that *God's explicit purpose for signs and wonders was to confirm His Word*. Jesus came to earth speaking God's message of truth and performing numerous signs to prove that He was from the Father (John 20:30, 31). After His ascension, the apostles continued to speak God's message of truth, and God continued to bear witness to the validity of their message through miraculous signs. Today we must trust the New Testament writings as "inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16, 17). The challenge of faith is to place full trust in the authority of the Scriptures as "the Lord's commandment" (1 Corinthians 14:37).

Most who claim to speak in tongues today also claim to have been baptized in the Holy Spirit. They contend that since John the Baptist promised that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit¹ and fire (Matthew 3:11), they have simply claimed this promise by faith. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was promised only to the original twelve apostles.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians, "There is . . . one baptism" (4:4, 5). This "one baptism" has to be water baptism, which was first commanded by Jesus in His great commission. When united with belief in Christ (Mark 16:16) in those who are "obedient from the heart" (Romans 6:17), water baptism frees us from sin and brings us into a new fellowship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19).

Claiming Angelic Languages

One may argue, "God has given me the tongue of an angel, and no man can interpret it." Where in the Bible did an angel ever speak to a man or a woman in any language other than his or her native tongue? Our God and His angelic host are capable of speaking any language or dialect known in heaven or on earth today! Remember also that since Paul commanded that interpretation be used when tongues were exercised in the assembly (1 Corinthians 14:27), he did not believe that anyone in Corinth was capable of speaking a language which could not be interpreted!

Exalting an Inferior Gift

Paul never exalted the gift of tongues as a superior gift in the church. The opposite is true. Tongues and the interpretation of tongues were named last in his lists of spiritual gifts (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:8–10, 28–30). Paul also wrote, "Greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, . . ." (1 Corinthians 14:5), and he expressed thankfulness that he spoke in tongues more than all the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 14:18). This does not mean that Paul spent *more time* speaking in tongues, but that he spoke *more languages* than anyone else. Paul's arguments must have had an humbling effect upon the Corinthians who were so proud of their showy gifts, especially the gift of tongues!

TONGUES TODAY VS. TONGUES OF THE BIBLE

What we read in the Scriptures regarding tongue-speaking differs from what we hear in the religious world today. It is important for Christians to be aware of these discrepancies so that we will be able to recognize and refuse false teaching. In view of that, let us examine some vital questions.

Why Do We See a Lack of Emphasis On Tongues in the New Testament?

If tongues are so important for Christians today, why did none of the gospel writers mention tongues in their writings (with the exception of Mark 16:17)? Why did Luke mention tongues only three times in the Book of Acts? Why did Paul downplay this gift in 1 Corinthians and not mention it in 2 Corinthians or in any of his letters

to the Christians in Rome, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, or Thessalonica? If tongue-speaking were a genuine proof of one's salvation in Christ, would not Paul have addressed the subject as he wrote to his personal friends Timothy, Titus, and Philemon? Why did James and Peter ignore the subject in their epistles, as is also true of the author of Hebrews? Why did the New Testament writers, miraculously inspired and guided by the Spirit, almost ignore this subject?

Why Do We See Such Emphasis On Tongues Today?

In contrast to the obvious silence of inspired writers, many preachers today cannot discuss religion without mentioning tongues. Some churches try to make the ability to speak in tongues a test of fellowship, even though Paul wrote that not all Christians could speak in tongues at that time (1 Corinthians 12:30). Some insist that one cannot be a spiritually mature child of God unless he speaks in a tongue. Is that the teaching of Jesus? Is that the emphasis of the New Testament, or can it be that tongues were never as important to God as some religious leaders make them today? Could it be that modern-day tongues are inspired by an evil spirit who "disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14)? You must answer these questions and one day give an answer for your practices. Jesus warned, "The word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day" (John 12:48). He also said, "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'" (Matthew 7:22, 23).

Why Do Some Ignore Paul's Commands Regarding Tongues?

Today many churches claiming the gift of tongues ignore Paul's instructions for exercising that gift. Paul wrote, "If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and let one interpret; but if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God" (1 Corinthians 14:27, 28). Paul concluded, "But let all things be done properly and in an orderly

manner" (v. 40). Some churches today set aside periods during their assemblies and encourage all who desire to speak in tongues to do so. A roar of voices arises from the assembly as each person tries to outspoke the others. Total confusion reigns as emotions run rampant, and this is in spite of the fact that the Bible clearly says, "For God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints" (1 Corinthians 14:33). How can such confusion be from the Holy Spirit, who taught that "two or at the most three, and each in turn" should speak in the assembly? How can God's Holy Spirit inspire tongues when modern churches ignore the Holy Spirit's teachings in order to "do their own thing"? Paul warned in 1 Corinthians 14:37, "If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment." To ignore Paul's words is to ignore the words of the Lord Jesus Himself. May we never be guilty of ignoring our Lord and His words of truth!

CONCLUSION

Miraculous signs in the first century were gifts Jesus gave to His apostles when He baptized them in His Holy Spirit. Through the hands of the apostles, the Spirit distributed those gifts "to each one individually just as He will[ed]" (1 Corinthians 12:11). When the last apostle died, the channel through which these gifts flowed into the church came to an end. This is not to say that the Holy Spirit is no longer personally involved in our lives today, but it is to affirm that He does not work in the same miraculous way that He worked while His written revelation was being delivered and confirmed through the apostles and prophets of the first century.

Someone may ask, "Is Jesus not the same yesterday, today, and forever?" (See Hebrews 13:8.) He is, but this does not mean that He works in the same way in every age of mankind. For example, Jesus still has the power to create anything He desires (see Colossians 1:16), but His creative handiwork is complete. The fact that He no longer exercises His creative power does not mean that He no longer possesses such miraculous power. It only means that there is no need to employ such power today.

What is true of His physical creation is just as true of His spiritual creation, the church. Jesus

died only one time for His church. His resurrection was a once-for-all-time event. The Word of God was miraculously delivered and confirmed "once for all . . . to the saints" (Jude 3). The church had only one birth at Pentecost. Jesus is the same in His nature, but He does not work the same in every generation.

The gospel message entails three major events—the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus (see 1 Corinthians 15:1–4)—which are never to be repeated. Jesus ascended to the Father only one time. He baptized His apostles with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost following His ascension. Through the chosen twelve He revealed the truths of His covenant, confirming those eternal truths "both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will" (Hebrews 2:4). There is no need for Jesus to continue confirming the truths which have been revealed once for all the saints. Miraculous gifts from the Holy Spirit have served their purpose. While God's Spirit continues to work supernaturally in the lives of Christians today, He no longer works exactly as He did during the first century as the Word of God was being revealed and confirmed. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus and walk by faith to the glory of our Lord! (See Hebrews 12:1–3.)

May God bless us as we seek to understand more fully His work in Christians of the first century and His work in Christians today!² ▲

The Divine Nature of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is God. He is divine. He is *eternal* (Hebrews 9:14). He is *omnipresent* (Psalm 139:7–10), *omniscient* (1 Corinthians 2:10, 11; Romans 8:26, 27; cf. Isaiah 40:13, 14), and *omnipotent* (Micah 3:8; cf. Matthew 12:28; Eph. 3:20). He is *holy*. (This is stated one hundred times in the Bible.) He possesses *foreknowledge* (Acts 1:16; 11:27, 28). He is *Sovereign* (2 Corinthians 3:17, 18; Revelation 2:7). He is the *creator* (Genesis 1:2–31; Psalm 104:30), the *regenerator* (2 Corinthians 3:6; Titus 3:5; Romans 15:16), and the *resurrector* (Romans 8:11; 1 Peter 3:18, 19).

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²I have written a Bible correspondence course entitled *What Does the Bible Say About Tongue-Speaking?* Copies are available through World Bible School, P.O. Box 3700, Visalia, CA 93278.