

Tongue-Speaking & the Holy Spirit

“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).

Tongue-speaking is a practice that is mentioned in the New Testament, but not in the Old Testament.¹ If the statement that Jesus is “the same yesterday and today, yes and forever” (Hebrews 13:8) means that in every age He performs the same miraculous acts, then God’s followers should have spoken in unlearned tongues since creation. Also, if tongue-speaking is a sign of superior spirituality, it seems strange that Jesus is not reported to have spoken in tongues. In the long period of Bible history, tongue-speaking is recorded only one time in Jerusalem, by the apostles on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–11); one time in Caesarea, when the door was opened to the Gentiles (Acts 10:44–46); one time in Ephesus, by twelve converts (Acts 19:6); and in Corinth, by members of the Lord’s church (1 Corinthians 12:10, 28; 13:8; 14:2–28). Nothing in the New Testament indicates that the practice continued in any of the congregations except in the church in Corinth.

WHAT IS TONGUE-SPEAKING?

The Hebrew word *leshonah* is most frequently translated “tongue”—in reference to the member of the body with which we produce speech (Judges 7:5; 2 Samuel 23:2)—or “language” (Esther 1:22; 3:12; Jeremiah 5:15; Ezekiel 3:5, 6). The Greek translation of the Hebrew *leshonah* is *glossa* (compare Isaiah 28:11 and 1 Corinthians 14:21; Gk.: *eteroglossois*). *Glossa* means either the member of the body, the tongue (Mark 7:33, 35)², a tapering jet like a flame (Acts 2:3), or a language (Acts 2:4, 11; 10:46; 19:6).

The first recorded instance of tongue-speaking was by the apostles on the Day of Pentecost. This was a miracle of speaking in different languages, not of one language being spoken by the apostles and understood in many different languages (Acts 2:4–11). The multitude heard in their own languages because the apostles were speaking “with other tongues,” or other languages (Acts 2:4). This was a very convincing sign (1 Corinthians 14:22) for the unbelieving Jews who were present.

Following this, Peter stood with the apostles and spoke to the crowd (Acts 2:14). The fact that he could be understood by everyone in the crowd does not mean that he was speaking one language but

¹On one occasion we read that “the Lord opened the mouth” of Balaam’s donkey, and she spoke (Numbers 22).

²See also Luke 1:64; 16:24; Acts 2:26; Romans 3:13; 14:11; 1 Corinthians 14:9; Philippians 2:11; James 1:26; 3:5, 6, 8; 1 Peter 3:10; 1 John 3:18; Revelation 16:10.

was understood in many languages. The Jews who had come to Jerusalem from the various nations (Acts 2:5–11) were bilingual; they could understand Peter as he spoke in Hebrew.

On a later occasion (Acts 20:16), Paul spoke in Jerusalem to a multitude of Jews (Acts 21:27) with multilingual backgrounds. Because they had retained the Hebrew language, they were able to understand him when he spoke to them in the Hebrew dialect (Acts 21:40).

WHAT DID PAUL TEACH CONCERNING TONGUE-SPEAKING?

The present debate over Paul's use of *glossai* (the plural of *glossa*), "tongues," as used in 1 Corinthians 14, has revolved around four proposed meanings: (1) heavenly languages, (2) ecstatic utterances that did not constitute a language, (3) sophisticated speech that could be understood only by the most learned, or (4) human languages that might or might not be understood by the one who spoke them. Only the fourth proposed meaning can be correct.

The tongues of Acts 2:4, 11 were apparently the native languages of the Jews who had come to observe the Pentecost feast in Jerusalem. On that day the apostles, unlearned in foreign languages, spoke the languages of the various countries that were represented. They spoke in *glossai* ("tongues"; Acts 2:11), which were also called *dialektos* (literally "dialect," translated "language" [Acts 1:19; 2:6, 8] and "dialect" [Acts 21:40; 22:2; 26:14]). These terms are used in the New Testament only of known languages.

The Book of Revelation uses *glossai* in reference to the various language classifications or groups of the world (Revelation 5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15). The term does not indicate the existence of heavenly languages, ecstatic speech, or prayer languages.

If Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 meant heavenly languages, ecstatic languages (emotion-excited, non-language utterances produced by people carried away by ecstasy), or sophisticated speech, then he was using a definition for *glossai* that was not used anywhere else in the Bible. Paul meant known human languages by his usage of *glossai*, as is evident from the following facts:

1. Paul taught that "tongues" were a gift of

the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:10) which God had placed in the church (1 Corinthians 12:10, 11, 28).

2. Tongue-speaking was to be used for teaching purposes (1 Corinthians 14:6).

3. Tongue-speaking was a sign for the unbeliever (1 Corinthians 14:22). If the unbeliever could not determine that something miraculous was happening, then tongue-speaking could not be a sign for him of God's miraculous power.

4. Tongues were for the edification of the one who spoke (1 Corinthians 14:4) or, if interpreted, for the edification of the church (1 Corinthians 14:5). In verse 4 Paul was not giving permission for one to speak in tongues in the church for self-edification. On the contrary, he was pointing out that, unless interpreted, tongue-speaking could benefit only the one who was doing the speaking. Later, he stated that no one should speak without an interpreter (1 Corinthians 14:28), since the church could not be edified by what they did not understand (1 Corinthians 14:5).

According to Paul, everything done in the assembly was to be for the edification of the church, not for personal edification (1 Corinthians 14:5, 12, 26). If tongues were meaningless ecstatic utterances, they could not be interpreted and the church could not be edified by them.

5. The tongues of Isaiah 28:11, which Paul quoted in reference to the tongue-speaking in Corinth (1 Corinthians 14:21), were foreign languages. These "tongues" were not ecstatic utterances or angelic languages.

6. The Greek *hermeneus*—with its cognate forms, including those with prefixes³—means "interpret," "interpretation," or "interpreter." The word refers to a translation of known words in an actual language. The only exception to this rule is Luke 24:27, where the meaning is "to explain" passages not understood by the hearers. This would imply that the "tongues" of 1 Corinthians 14 were languages that could be interpreted.

Nothing is stated in the New Testament concerning whether all interpreters obtained their ability to interpret through the help of the Spirit

³See Matthew 1:23; Mark 15:22, 34; Luke 24:27; John 1:38, 41, 42; 9:7; Acts 4:36; 9:36; 13:8; 1 Corinthians 12:10, 30; 14:5, 13, 26, 27, 28; Hebrews 7:2.

or relied on personal understanding of languages they had already learned. The ability to interpret is mentioned, but the means of that interpretation is not always given (1 Corinthians 14:27, 28). This may imply that a person who had learned the language could interpret as well as a person who did not know the language but was enabled by the Holy Spirit to interpret (1 Corinthians 12:10, 11). The ability of a person who had learned a language to interpret in that language would confirm that tongues were known languages.

The injunction of this passage would apply to a missionary in a foreign land. If no one in the audience can interpret his language, he is to keep silent. Unless his words are understood, those who hear will not be benefited.

An utterance must have meaning before it can be translated. Meaningless ecstatic utterances would be impossible to interpret. Paul's indication that the tongues in Corinth could be translated (1 Corinthians 14:5, 13, 27) must mean that tongue-speaking involved real languages.

WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE OF TONGUE-SPEAKING?

Some conclude that "tongues" in 1 Corinthians 14:2 were angelic languages or prayer languages that no one could understand. Such a conclusion would make Paul contradict himself throughout the rest of chapter 14. Fred Fisher's observation concerning this verse is correct: "This does not necessarily mean that *no one* understood him, but that none of those *present* understood him."⁴ (Emphasis mine.)

In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul gave the following instructions with regard to speaking in tongues, indicating that this gift was for communication purposes:

1. Tongues were to be interpreted for the edification of the church (v. 5). Based on this fact, we can conclude that the information given to the tongue-speaker was not just meaningless garble or just for his personal benefit, but was information that could build up the church. If this was not interpreted for the congregation, the only one who could be edified would be the speaker (if he understood the language). The one

who spoke in tongues was to pray for the ability to interpret so that he could edify the congregation (vv. 5, 12, 13).

2. Tongue-speaking that would profit the church, Paul said, must be "by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching" (v. 6). Revelation, knowledge, prophecy, and teaching in this setting were messages from God (1 Corinthians 12:8, 10, 28–30). The church could be benefited through such messages only if they were clothed in a language that could be understood. Nothing is said to indicate that Paul meant prayer languages or angelic utterances.

3. Just as the proper sounds had to be made on musical instruments to call the Jews to worship or to battle, tongues had to convey a distinct message in order to be of help to the ones who heard (vv. 7, 8). The one who spoke had to make sounds which the hearer could understand; otherwise, no one would know what was spoken (v. 9).

4. The world has many languages (Gk.: *phonon*, meaning "sounds"; v. 10). Useful sounds and languages are those which convey a meaningful message. If the language was unfamiliar, the listener would have no more understanding than if he were listening to a foreigner (v. 11).

5. The purpose of tongues was to communicate so that listeners could give their hearty agreement by saying "Amen." The person who did not understand the language could not say "Amen" since he did not understand what was being said (v. 16).

The word *idiotes* (from which we get the word "idiot") is translated "ungifted" in verses 23 and 24. It means one who is untaught or unskilled (Acts 4:13; 2 Corinthians 11:6). The implication is that a tongue could be understood by a person who was educated in that particular language, but the person who had not learned the tongue would not be able to understand it. From this we can conclude that tongues were languages which could be understood without an interpreter by those who had learned to speak those languages.

6. Tongue-speaking was a sign for the unbeliever (v. 22). Unless some in the audience could determine that the tongues were God-given languages, the sounds that were being made could not be a sign. Peter said that what the Jews heard (the apostles speaking in the languages of the

⁴Fred Fisher, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1975), 220.

many nations present on the Day of Pentecost and the sound like a mighty wind) was evidence that Jesus was enthroned at God's right hand (Acts 2:4–11, 33). Tongues were an impressive sign to these unbelieving Jews.

The Jews said concerning the apostles' utterances, "We hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God" (Acts 2:11b). No ecstatic utterance or nonhuman language could have moved them to make such a statement. Neither would such speech have caused people to be amazed and marvel (Acts 2:7) as did Galileans speaking in languages they had not learned. The tongues in which the apostles spoke that day were a convincing "sign" that God was speaking through them.

DOES TONGUE-SPEAKING INVOLVE PRAYERS OR ANGELIC LANGUAGES?

Today those who claim to speak in tongues use interpreters in foreign countries instead of speaking in the languages of the countries where they are teaching. When asked about using interpreters, they usually try to escape the dilemma of being unable to speak in a foreign language by saying that "tongues" are prayer languages or angelic languages. They rely on the phrase "let him speak to himself and to God" in 1 Corinthians 14:28b. However, this often-quoted passage also states that the person who has no interpreter is to "keep silent in the church." This does not allow for mumbling aloud to God in the assembly. "Silent," translated from *sigao*, means to make no sound whatsoever (Luke 9:36; 20:26; Acts 12:17; 15:12, 13 ["stopped speaking"]; Romans 16:25 ["secret"]; 1 Corinthians 14:28, 30, 34).

Many who claim to speak in tongues state that the purpose of tongues as a "prayer language" is to prevent Satan from understanding what is said. How do they know that Satan cannot understand tongues? No revelation from God makes such a statement.

First Corinthians 14:28 does not say that the person speaking in tongues is to speak in an unknown language to himself and to God when no interpreter is present. More likely, the text means that he is to communicate with himself and with God in a language he can understand. If he himself could understand or interpret the

tongue, then an interpreter would be present. He would be able to speak and then interpret for the benefit of the congregation. If he could not interpret, he would not be able to understand what he was saying to himself or what he was saying to God.

Most tongue-speaking groups believe that they have Spirit-gifted interpreters present. If this is true, then no one among them should be praying personal prayers in tongues by talking to himself and to God. According to their own reasoning, this should take place only if no interpreter is present.

Paul used hypothetical statements in 1 Corinthians 13:1–3 to emphasize that without love gifts were meaningless. Even though he could speak in tongues more than all the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 14:18), he did not say that he spoke in angelic tongues, knew all mysteries, had faith to remove mountains, gave all of his possessions to feed the poor, or delivered his body to be burned. Likewise, he was not saying that he prayed in a tongue with his spirit praying but without his mind understanding the prayer. On the contrary, he said that he would pray with the spirit and the understanding (1 Corinthians 14:14; KJV). He stated that he would rather speak "five words" to instruct others than "ten thousand" in a language they could not understand (1 Corinthians 14:19).

DOES TONGUE-SPEAKING INVOLVE FOREIGN LANGUAGES?

To conclude that the tongues of 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 were only prayers or heavenly languages does not relieve tongue-speakers from being able to speak in an understandable way to those whose languages they do not know. The apostles did just that on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4–11). If a deep faith or the gift of the Holy Spirit can give the ability to speak as did the apostles, then tongue-speakers fail their own test. If they cannot speak languages that they have never heard, studied, or been taught as a sign to those who hear, then they cannot do what the apostles did. The tongue-speaking which occurred on the Day of Pentecost has ceased; otherwise, tongue-speakers today should be able to go to any country and speak the language without studying it. The Holy Spirit still has the power to give the ability to speak in a language

unknown to the speaker but understandable to the hearers. If people cannot duplicate what the apostles did, then such tongues have ceased.

The fact that tongue-speaking groups need interpreters when they converse with other language groups is proof that they do not have the tongue-speaking ability given to the apostles on the Day of Pentecost. God gave the apostles the power to communicate with those whose languages they had not learned. The failure to perform this deed today is not because God cannot impart such power, but because tongue-speaking has ceased. If it has not ceased, then communicating with others in languages unknown by the speaker should be continuing today.

Women in tongue-speaking churches usually speak in the assemblies as often as—or more often than—the men. Paul wrote, “Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, . . . for it is improper for a woman to speak in church” (1 Corinthians 14:34, 35). Women cannot be compelled to speak, for “the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets” (1 Corinthians 14:32). Paul was writing the commandment of the Lord (1 Corinthians 14:37).

If all the members of a congregation spoke in tongues at one time without any interpreters, the unbeliever who did not understand would think that they were crazy (v. 23). The opposite would be true if those who prophesied spoke one at a time in a language understood by the hearer (vv. 24, 31). Those who spoke in tongues were to speak one at a time, allowing no more than three speakers. Also, someone was to interpret. If no interpreter was present, tongue-speakers were to remain silent (1 Corinthians 14:27, 28).

According to Paul, tongue-speaking was one of the lesser gifts (1 Corinthians 14:5), as is also reflected in the fact that tongue-speaking and the interpretation of tongues are always at the bottom of the list of gifts (1 Corinthians 12:10, 30). After listing the gifts in order of importance, Paul’s admonition was to “earnestly desire the greater gifts” (1 Corinthians 12:31a). He then showed in 1 Corinthians 13 that love was a more excellent way.

WHEN WAS TONGUE-SPEAKING TO CEASE?

The question is not “Was tongue-speaking to cease?” but “When was tongue-speaking to

cease?” First Corinthians 13:8 clearly states that tongue-speaking would cease.

In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul showed that love is more excellent than the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:31b). His reasons were as follows: (1) Without love, tongues are simply empty noises (v. 1). (2) Without love, the one with divinely imparted faith and knowledge is nothing (v. 2). (3) Without love, giving one’s possessions to the poor and being a martyr profits nothing (v. 3). (4) Love will remain, while miraculous gifts will cease (vv. 8, 13).

Prophecy, tongue-speaking, and knowledge were to cease upon the arrival of the perfect (1 Corinthians 13:8–10). In explanation, Paul compared himself to the church in its infancy. These gifts were like toys Paul had owned as a child but had put away when he became a man (1 Corinthians 13:11). He further said that the use of gifts was like seeing oneself in a mirror, which in those days did not give a clear image. He contrasted the dim view in a mirror with seeing face to face. Although they were necessary for the infant church, miraculous spiritual gifts would cease when the church had been provided with everything it needed to become mature.

The meaning of “perfect” (*teleios*;⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:10) is important to an understanding of this passage. It does not mean “flawless,” as we sometimes use the word “perfect” today, but instead means having reached an end or full development—having become “complete” (Matthew 19:21; Colossians 1:28) or “mature” (1 Corinthians 2:6; 14:20; Ephesians 4:13; Hebrews 5:14).

The purpose of gifts was to supply the church with everything it needed to develop fully. Various helps were given to make this possible (Ephesians 4:11–13). Instead of coming to maturity, the Corinthians remained spiritual infants (1 Corinthians 3:1, 2). They had failed to reap the benefits of their spiritual gifts.

Those who feel spiritually superior because they believe they have spiritual gifts should realize that gifts were not an end in themselves, but crutches to help the infant church to grow. When Christians received all they needed to

⁵In English, perfect is the word most often used; the Greek word itself means mature, complete, whole” (Robert G. Bratcher, *A Translator’s Guide to Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians* [New York: United Bible Societies, 1982], 128).

reach maturity, then the gifts would cease.

Christian growth and development depended on the Word (1 Peter 2:2), by which people could come to know Jesus (2 Peter 3:15–18) and seek to grow to His stature (Ephesians 4:13). Until the revelatory gifts (prophecy, tongue-speaking, and knowledge) gave the Word completely, the church could not mature in the knowledge of God’s Word.

When all of God’s revelation had been given through these gifts, then the church would have everything it needed in order to learn how to be complete. When that time came, then the revelatory gifts would cease. This happened when the canon of the New Testament was completed. Since then no new prophecy, divinely imparted knowledge, or revelation through tongues has been given. Every teaching necessary for the complete development of the church has been revealed. The Scriptures thoroughly furnish what the church needs so “that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:17).

Paul did not have to believe that the revelation of Scripture had been completed when he wrote 2 Timothy 3:16, 17. His statement could include the Old and New Testament Scriptures written by that time, plus any subsequent Scriptures. Every revelation before, during, and after Paul’s writing furnishes all the truth we need.

Paul stated, “For we know in part, and we prophesy in part” (1 Corinthians 13:9). This would include “tongues” for tongues were one vehicle through which “prophecy” and “knowledge” were given (1 Corinthians 14:6).

The revelation that had been given up to this point was in part. The Greek word used here, *merous*, means a share, incomplete, “part, in contrast to the whole.”⁶ *Merous* also appears in Luke 11:36; 15:12; John 19:23; Acts 5:2.

A time would come when what was in part would be complete; then what was in part would cease. When prophecy, tongue-speaking, and divinely revealed knowledge had fulfilled their purpose—giving the church all it needed to be complete—then these gifts would cease.

⁶Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., rev. William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 506.

The contrast is between “in part” and “perfect” (complete). If what was “in part” was revealed knowledge and prophecy (1 Corinthians 13:9), then “perfect” implies the completing of that which was “in part,” that is, complete knowledge and prophecy. Heaven, a perfected state, the coming of Jesus, and love were not under consideration.

Although Paul discussed love in 1 Corinthians 13:1–8, he did this in the context of gifts (1 Corinthians 12–14), a subject to which he returned in verse 8. The development of love within the church was not what determined the cessation of gifts. Rather, these gifts ceased because they had fulfilled their purpose of providing what the church needed to mature.

As the Word of God was being completely delivered, it was confirmed through miraculous signs (Mark 16:20; Acts 14:3; Hebrews 2:3, 4), including tongue-speaking (1 Corinthians 14:22). When revelation terminated, so did miraculous signs, because they had served their purpose.

CONCLUSION

In some cases, God used languages which the speakers had not learned as a sign to unbelievers and to reveal His Word (Acts 2:11; 10:46; 1 Corinthians 14:6, 22). These were not to be spoken to those unlearned in such languages, unless they were interpreted so that the hearers could be edified (1 Corinthians 14:16). When tongue-speaking and the other miraculous gifts had served their purpose, they ceased.

In his book *Glossolalia: From God or Man?* Jimmy Jividen presented the following main headings: “The Need of the Gift Ceased,” “Means of Obtaining Gifts Ceased,” and “Paul Predicted the End of Gifts.”⁷ These ideas well summarize the evidence that tongue-speaking and other miraculous gifts have ceased.

Signs are unnecessary now that God’s Word has been fully revealed and confirmed (Mark 16:20). No longer are the apostles present to confer gifts through the laying on of hands (Acts 8:14–18; 19:6). Paul said that gifts would cease (1 Corinthians 13:8–10), and this occurred with the death of the last person upon whom an apostle laid his hands. ■

⁷Jimmy Jividen, *Glossolalia: From God or Man?* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Star Bible Publications, 1971), 144–47.