

Speaking in Tongues in the Early Church

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Introduction

There are many sincere believers who hold to a practice wherein they claim to speak in a special prayer language understandable only by God. The purpose of this lesson is not to discourage or disparage these dedicated believers, but simply to explain why many believers do not share in the same beliefs and practices.

A Purpose for Speaking in Other Tongues

In John 14:26 and 16:13, Jesus was speaking to His disciples about the time to come following His death, burial, and resurrection. In these two verses He spoke about the coming of the Holy Spirit, who would "teach you all things" and "guide you into all truth." Several passages in the NT refer to the work of the Holy Spirit and the miraculous, spiritual gifts manifested in the early church.

Mark 16:17-20 says, "And these signs shall follow them that believe; in My name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues. They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, He was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word with signs following. Amen."

Hebrews 2:3-4 says, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, 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?"

These last two passages both refer to the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit which were in existence in the 1st century church. These two passages teach that one great purpose of these spiritual gifts was to aid in the proclamation of the word of God, and to help in confirming what was being proclaimed.

Speaking in Different Tongues on the Day of Pentecost

In Acts chapter 2, we find the glorious beginning of the church on the day of Pentecost. This great event was made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit enabling the apostles (though the 120 persons mentioned in 1:15 may have all been present, those who received this anointing were deemed in 2:7 to be Galileans, thus most likely indicating the apostles only) to "speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (2:4). This ability was necessary because people had gathered in Jerusalem "from every nation under heaven" (2:5). In order for the great news to be convincingly proclaimed and understood by all these people, this miraculous gift was certainly needed.

The word "tongue" is from the Hebrew word *lashon* (Strong #3956), which is found 115 times in the OT and generally refers either to the physical organ of speech or a human language of speech. In the Greek, the word is *glossa* (Strong #1100); it is found 50 times in the NT.

It too, like the Hebrew word, refers at times to the physical tongue or, according to Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, "the language used by a particular people in distinction from that of other nations." Thayer clarifies that the phrase "speak with other tongues" in Acts 2:4 means "to speak with other than their native, i.e. in foreign tongues; to speak with new tongues which the speaker has not learned previously."

Acts 2:6 further clarifies the meaning of such when the word *dialekto* (dialect) is used; it says when the apostles spoke, "every man heard them speak in his own language." Therefore, the utterances of the apostles on that occasion were not incomprehensible syllables, but were, in fact, clearly understood words and sentences spoken in the languages and dialects of the people assembled before them on that day.

Notice verses 9-11: there we find a list of folks from over a dozen different places, each speaking different languages and/or dialects. And yet the apostles, being filled with the Holy Spirit, were miraculously able to speak in all these languages, even though they had never before been able to do so. Jesus had said in John 14:12, “Greater works than these shall [you] do.” Surely such came to pass on this day as it appears the apostles did something here not done by Jesus Himself. (This gift would apparently be further needed at times to obey the command of Jesus in Mark 16:15, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.”)

It is debated as to the exact manner in which all this proceeded on that day. It is evident that Peter was not the only one preaching, at least in the beginning. In Acts 2:11, the listeners declared, “We hear them [the various apostles] in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God.”

There is a question, however, as to exactly what occurred when Peter stood to preach. V14 says, “But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: ‘Men of Judea, and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give heed to my words.’”

It may be that Peter addressed first only those he calls “men of Judea” in their native language, and then later he spoke to those of other languages. On the other hand, it may be that the other apostles continued to speak to other groups in their languages (with perhaps the same or similar words to that of Peter’s, while only Peter’s are recorded).

Finally, it may be that all those gathered, while each having a particular language/dialect that they spoke and understood, were able to also understand the Jewish language spoken by Peter so that only one such address was then made. Regardless, the glorious word of God was proclaimed on that amazing day through the use of “tongues,” that being a variety of real, human languages known by those in attendance.

Cornelius and the Ephesians

There are only two other instances in the book of Acts similar to that which occurred at Pentecost...

In Acts 10:44-47, we find the only other case where the Holy Spirit is said to directly fall upon anyone. On the day of Pentecost, it had happened to the apostles to enable the gospel to be proclaimed to the Jews. Here in Acts 10, it happened to show that the gospel was also for the Gentiles. Peter had earlier been given a vision to teach such. Then, in v44-46, while he was speaking to Cornelius and his household, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. And all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God.”

To confirm, not only to Peter, but also to the Jewish Christians present, that the gospel was also for the Gentiles, the Holy Spirit caused them (the Gentiles) to speak with tongues and exalt God. This is most similar to what occurred by the apostles in Acts 2:11 when the listeners declared, “We hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God.” In fact, as Peter relates this episode in Jerusalem later, he said, “The Holy Spirit fell on them, just as He did upon us at the beginning” (11:15), thus evidently referring to what occurred at Pentecost.

The only other similar instance in Acts involved about 12 men in Ephesus. In Acts 19, Paul found some disciples who had been baptized “into John’s baptism” (v3). Their response showed a great ignorance of the gospel; perhaps they had been baptized by some of John’s disciples after Pentecost (and John’s baptism in preparation of the kingdom thus ceasing) and had not been properly taught and baptized. Upon proper teaching, they were then “baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (v5). Paul then laid his hands on them, “the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking with tongues and prophesying” (v6).

Notice this was not a “baptism of the Holy Spirit” directly from above as the gifts they received were conferred through the laying on of an apostle’s hands (other occurrences of laying on of hands are recorded only in Acts 6:6 concerning the deacons and 8:17 concerning the Samaritans). Also notice that in both these instances (Cornelius and the Ephesian men), the same Greek word *glossa* is used, and there is no reason to believe that this is referring to anything other than real, human languages.

Speaking in Tongues in 1 Corinthians

The only other record in Scripture of miraculous "tongues" is to be found in 1 Corinthians 12-14. Despite what some sincere believers may think, there is no reason given to indicate that "tongues" here means anything other than real, human languages; the same Greek word *glossa* is again used here. An interpretation of this section of Scripture is clearly understood when viewed in light of this ordinary meaning of "tongues." Again, Paul gives us no reason to do otherwise.

He speaks to the Christians at Corinth about their use of miraculous, spiritual gifts. Evidently there was some controversy at Corinth regarding these gifts, particularly the gift of speaking in different tongues. Paul's comments in chapter 14 indicate that those who were blessed with the gift of speaking in different tongues were somewhat boastful of their particular gift, and that those who were not able to speak in tongues were envious of those who could. Paul wants to teach them that every gift is important, and that no one particular gift, not even speaking in other tongues, should be held as more important than other gifts.

In 1 Corinthians 12:4-12, Paul reminds them that every member is important, and that each gift is necessary "for the common good" (12:7). He clarifies in v10 and in v30 that not every Christian is able to speak in other tongues, and that speaking in other tongues should not be regarded as the most important spiritual gift.

In chapter 14, Paul's comments indicate that some aspects of their worship assemblies were not as they should be. Evidently various members were each trying to "steal the show" through the use of their particular gift, and those who could speak in other tongues were apparently doing so with little restraint. Paul instructs that the purpose of this particular gift was for teaching unbelievers (14:22), and that if there was no one present who understood that particular language, or there was no interpreter, they were to be silent. Otherwise, only God would be able to understand (14:2), and that was not the intent. Paul commands, "Let all things be done properly and in an orderly manner" (14:40).

Verses 26ff teach that each member should be given an opportunity to edify the others, and that no one should speak in another tongue (language), even though inspired by the Holy Spirit, unless someone was present who was able to understand that language and interpret for all assembled. Look at verses 32-33; this shows that they were to exercise control over the expression of their gifts; the Holy Spirit did not overpower them and leave them helpless and uncontrollable over their actions.

Miraculous Gift of Speaking in Tongues was Temporary

As important as these spiritual gifts were, Paul wanted the early Christians to understand that they were temporary, and that there was something more important they needed to develop. In 1 Corinthians chapter 13, Paul teaches that love is a gift or a quality that surpasses all others; it is a way that will endure throughout all the ages of mankind.

Some have misunderstood Paul's statement in v1 about the "tongues of men and of angels." Paul does not say (as some contend) that he spoke in some heavenly, angelic language. Rather he is using a figure of speech throughout these first 3 verses. He actually mentions five things that would be worthless without love: Speaking in the tongues of angels (v1); Knowing all mysteries and all knowledge (v2); Having all faith so as to move mountains (v2); Giving all his possessions to feed the poor (v3); Giving his body to be burned (v3).

Notice in regards to all these things he said "IF" or "THOUGH" he could do so, if he didn't have love, it would profit nothing. He did not claim to literally do any of these things!

In this same chapter, Paul says that miraculous, spiritual gifts, while important and necessary for that time, were nevertheless temporal in nature and would some day cease to exist. 1 Corinthians 13:8-12 says, "Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part, and we prophecy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. When I was a child, I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known."

The statement in verse 8, though often overlooked by many in the religious world, is clear: miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit were temporary in nature. There would come a time when they would stop. Concerning the gifts of miraculous prophecy and miraculous knowledge, Paul uses the Greek word *katargeo*, which means (according to Vine's Expository Dictionary) "to reduce to inactivity." Concerning the gift of tongues, Paul uses the word *pauo*, which means "to stop, to make an end." Vine further says regarding 13:8, "They were to be rendered of no effect after their temporary use was fulfilled [just as] when the apostle became a man he did away with the ways of a child."

When Were the Miraculous Gifts to End?

Verses 8-12 state that such gifts would some day cease to exist, and that such would happen "when the perfect comes." According to Thayer's lexicon, the word "perfect" is from the Greek word *teleios* (actually *to teleion*, neuter gender) which means something that is "brought to its end, finished; wanting nothing necessary to completeness; perfect."

It is suggested by some that this "completion" or "perfect" refers to the second coming of Christ (thus allowing for the gift of tongues, etc. to continue until the end of time). However, such would ultimately contradict what Paul says later in this chapter. Not only does he speak of gifts that will cease, but also of three gifts that will abide: faith, hope, and love (v13).

Surely a gift that will abide has to last longer than a gift that will cease. However, the Bible teaches that faith and hope will, in fact, one day cease, when faith becomes sight and when hope is realized at the return of Christ. Love, the greatest of gifts, not only is abiding, but eternal.

Since faith and hope will cease at the return of Christ, and these are referred to as gifts that abide, the gifts that will cease (prophecy, knowledge, tongues) MUST cease prior to the return of Christ. This in itself does not say exactly when, but it proves beyond a reasonable doubt that the miraculous gifts must cease PRIOR to the return of Christ, not AT the return of Christ.

Looking again to v8-12, the context of the passage itself dictates what is being completed. Paul said in verse 10, "When the perfect comes, the partial will be done away." What was partial? The answer to that is in verse 9: "For we know in part, and we prophesy in part." At the time Paul wrote these words, their knowledge and understanding of God's will was only partial. God was still revealing His will to the relatively-infant church through the Holy Spirit who was inspiring the apostles in their teaching. It was therefore apparently God's intention that such miraculous gifts would continue throughout the time of the apostles, and that these miraculous gifts would thus pass away as the apostles themselves would pass away.

History does seem to support this in that there was little or no mention of such in the 2nd century and beyond. Philip Shaff, in his renowned work *History of the Christian Church*, appears to represent the majority of scholarship when he spoke of "the miraculous gifts of the apostolic church, which gradually disappeared as Christianity became settled in humanity, and its supernatural principle was naturalized on earth" (Vol. 2, p423).

Conclusion

There is little doubt but that the majority of those who claim to speak in tongues today are truly sincere believers who are striving to conform their lives and practices to what they believe the Bible to teach. There is also little doubt but that many such believers probably possess a greater degree of honest emotional fervor than do many other believers. As stated at the beginning of this lesson, there is no intent to condemn such people for their love for God and their desire to serve Him.

Nevertheless, it is hoped that this lesson has adequately explained why many believers see no similarity between modern-day tongue-speaking and what occurred in the 1st century. As already mentioned, the modern claim is to speak in a special prayer language only God can understand. On the other hand, the New Testament seems clearly to speak of the gift as being given to only a few Christians of the 1st century, and that the gift was the ability to speak in real languages understandable by the people of that time.